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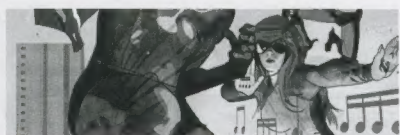
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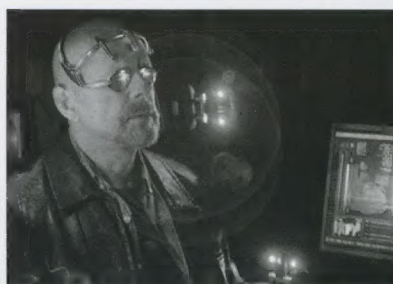


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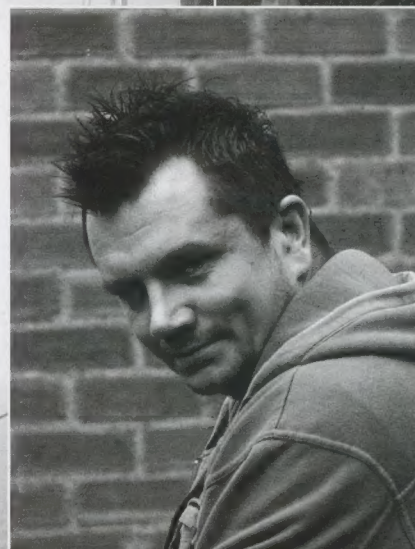
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Welcome to the final issue of 2009 and the last (for now, at least) to have its cover graced by some Adam Tredowski artwork. If you visit the Special Features category of our website (ttopress.com/interzone) you'll find a brief interview with Adam (that's him above), along with a bit more encouragement to visit his various online galleries. We've enjoyed working with Adam this past year, and relished breaking a few rules – 'the masthead *must* go here' – in order to better complement his artwork, hopefully making the magazine that bit more exciting to look at in the process.

We hope you agree that it's been a success, because it's an experiment we're going to repeat in 2010, with a slight variation. Warwick Fraser-Coombe will supply the art for all six covers, each one a complete image in its own right, but which, when joined together, will form a new, much larger seventh image.

Things might return to 'normal' after that, because we'd like to offer covers to all our regular artists and wouldn't want to keep them waiting too long, especially as they always work extremely hard, sometimes completing assignments in a matter of days, and often without receiving the praise they deserve. Thanks again to all of you!

And thanks to you too, dear reader, for supporting *Interzone* through another year. Not that you've *quite* finished with 2009 yet, as it's time to start thinking about what you'd like to vote for (and against!) in the Readers' Poll opening next issue. There'll be a list of all eligible stories from issues 220–225 inclusive to help remind you.

So, see you in 2010!



Langford on a vain quest for the Sandworms of Dune

Kim Stanley Robinson took a poke at the Booker Prize in September's *New Scientist* sf special, calling sf 'the best British literature of our time' and complaining that Booker juries 'judge in ignorance and give their awards to what usually turn out to be historical novels. [...] these novels are not about now in the way science fiction is. Thus it seems to me that three or four of the last 10 Booker prizes should have gone to science fiction novels the juries hadn't read.' Booker judge John Mullan (a professor of English) ringingly affirmed his sf ignorance and 'said that he "was not aware of science fiction," arguing that science fiction has become a "self-enclosed world". / "When I was 18 it was a genre as accepted as other genres," he said, but now "it is in a special room in book shops, bought by a special kind of person who has special weird things they go to and meet each other."' (*Guardian*) Could he mean literary festivals? Spies inform me of Mullan's attendance at the Jane Austen Society of North America convention – including 'Fashion Demonstration, "Dressing Mr. Darcy"' – presumably not a special weird thing but simply normal.

Assorted Awards. *The Age Book of the Year* (\$A20,000 Australian non-genre prize): Steven Amsterdam's post-apocalypse novel *Things We Didn't See Coming*. ■ *British*

Fantasy Award for best novel: 'William Heaney' (Graham Joyce), *Memoirs of a Master Forger*. ■ *Seiun* (Japanese translation). Novel: Robert Charles Wilson, *Spin*. Short: Ted Chiang, *The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate*. ■ *World Fantasy Life Achievement*: Ellen Asher, Jane Yolen.

Ray Bradbury's interview in the summer *Strand* opened with a touch of *Fahrenheit 451*, or *Fahrenheit Silicon*: 'The Internet should be destroyed! I hate the Internet! I hate computers! And, warming further to the computer theme: "We should get rid of them, yeah!" Strangely enough there are two false Ray Bradburys on Facebook, using different photos of the great man.

Ursula K. Le Guin, reviewing Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*, seizes on the key point which makes this novel Definitely Not Science Fiction: 'It is no comfort to find that some of the genetic experiments are humanoids designed to replace humanity. Who wants to be replaced by people who turn blue when they want sex, so that the men's enormous genitals are blue all the time? Who wants to believe that a story in which that happens isn't science fiction?' (*Guardian*)

District 9 offended Nigeria's government, which told cinemas to stop showing a film

that according to the Information Minister 'denigrated Nigeria's image by portraying us as if we are cannibals, we are criminals.' Actor Eugene Khumbanyiwa pointed out: 'It's a story, you know... It's not like Nigerians do eat aliens. Aliens don't even exist in the first place.' (BBC)

Ken Livingstone opened his *New Statesman* interview of Iain Banks with the question in every reader's mind: 'I remember meeting you at the Brighton Science Fiction Festival in 1987. There were a lot of people walking round in Vulcan costumes. Were you dressed as a Wookiee?' Banks: 'Absolutely not!'

Magazine Scene. Further casualties of tough times: *The Dark Side* (with uncertain hopes of a 2010 relaunch), *Death Ray* and the revived *Thrilling Wonder Stories* (which managed only two issues).

Doublethink. Self-publishing pundit Henry Baum is miraculously untainted by genre: 'Personally, my own novel is science fiction, but I'm not a science fiction writer.' (*Sacramento News & Review*)

Publishers & Sinners. Rebellion, owner of *2000 AD* and Abaddon Books, bought the Solaris book imprint from Games Workshop.

Conspiracy Corner. Why was *Big Brother* cancelled? Perhaps because the female participant Bea revealed secrets They don't want you to know: 'If the astronauts had really gone to the moon they'd all be dead by now from cancer caused by the moon's radiation. And why was there a flag flapping on the moon? America faked it to get one over Russia.' Moreover, sf and the net are terribly evil, as shown by an anecdote from Facebook-addicted Bea: 'An old lady my mum knows died and people only found out after 16 pints of milk were sitting on her doorstep... Her neighbours didn't care because they didn't know her. They were all probably watching science fiction on the internet.' This proves it! (Digitalspy.co.uk)

Cordwainer Smith was the subject of strange revelations from the buyer of his library: 'And he had an interest in ladies' lingerie. One of the more unusual things we bought from his estate was a bra mannequin, complete with bra. Several

drawers full of bras we let lie.' (Larry McMurtry, *Books: A Memoir*, 2009)

John M. Ford (1957–2006) is still fondly remembered, but his non-fan family would rather we didn't. He made no will, and the estate is reportedly refusing to license any new or reprint editions of his work.

Eddie Izzard on the agony of running 1,100 miles in charity marathons: '... it's kind of like science fiction in a way.' (*Guardian*) Yes, finishing *Battlefield Earth* was a comparable experience.

Court Circular. The Tolkien Trust/New Line Cinema lawsuit for non-payment of royalties was settled on deeply confidential terms. Everyone claims to be happy, and the planned films of *The Hobbit* can go ahead. The Warner Bros president/CEO thanked the unsung little people,

saying that Warner 'deeply valued the contribution of the Tolkien novels to the success of our films...' (*Guardian*) Meanwhile MGM, whose money is needed to start *Hobbit* production, is desperately fending off bankruptcy.

Thog's Masterclass.

Dept of Lumpy Simile. 'From Ujuk, however, a heavy, misshapen umbrage fell and lay like a prone incubus beside his chair.' (Clark Ashton Smith, *Zothique*, 1970) ■ *Neat Tricks Dept.* 'He chose to ignore the violent purple stain splashing down the white robe as Lurz's hand continued a motion his gaped mouth forgot.' (Joan Cox, *Star Web*, 1980) ■ *Undercover Dept.* 'Atar stood scowling out from beneath his bushy moustache.' (Troy Denning, *Star Wars Fate of the Jedi: Abyss*, 2009) ■ *Neat Tricks Dept.* 'She heard a shocked silence from Baxter and the GAS lieutenant.' (*Ibid*)

R.I.P

Barbara Bova, US literary agent, wife of Ben Bova and founder in 1974 of the Barbara Bova Literary Agency, died from cancer on 23 September.

Donald M. Grant (1927–2009), US small-press publisher and editor of early sf bibliography, critical anthologies and handsome editions of Robert E. Howard, Lovecraft and others, died on 19 August. He was 82.

Barry Letts (1925–2009), UK producer, director and writer involved with *Doctor Who* since 1967 (as producer 1969–1974; he also wrote scripts and spinoff novels), died in early October aged 84.

Troy Kennedy Martin (1932–2009), UK screenwriter who adapted Angus Wilson's *The Old Men at the Zoo* and scripted the much-praised sf/thriller serial *Edge of Darkness* (1985) – both for BBC TV – died on 15 September aged 77.

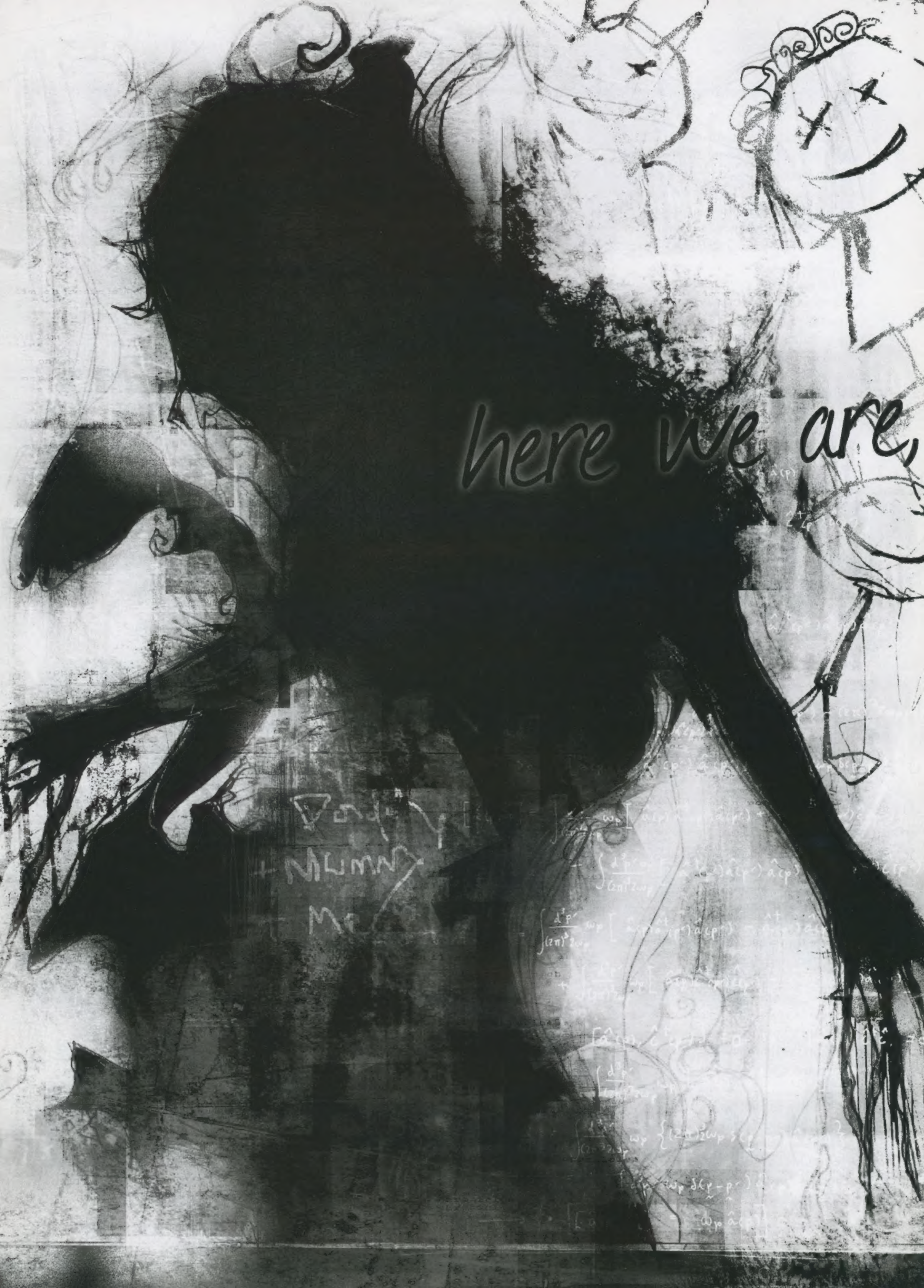
Mary Hunter Schaub (1943–2009), US fantasy author who chiefly wrote in Andre Norton's 'Witch World' setting, and collaborated with Norton on *The Magestone* (1996), died on 25 September.



Jennifer Swift (above), US-born author long resident in Oxford, whose stories appeared in *Amazing*, *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, *Interzone* and other magazines, died from cancer on 30 September.

Gene Van Troyer (1950–2009), US teacher, author, translator, anthologist and poet active in SFWA and the SF Poetry Association, died on 17 July aged 58.

Many thanks to Scott Edelman for the photo



here we are,

falling through shadows by jason sanford

Miker drove our fire engine through the dark neighborhood, the red emergency lights flash-synching to the deep bass of the rumbler siren. Parked cars and flower gardens and mailboxes flashed by, illuminated for seconds before sliding back to night. We used to turn the siren off on quiet streets like these to avoid disturbing the peaceful, sleeping taxpayers. Not anymore. Now we wanted everyone to know there were still those who braved the darkness.

But bravery didn't mean we were stupid. While Miker steered, the rest of us aimed spotlights all around, jumping burn-deep shadows off everything we passed. As we entered one intersection Karl, the probie four months out of the fire academy, yelled "Ripper!" For a moment we saw it – a black line reaching with stick arms. But then the ripper shifted and we realized it was only a tree's shadow, cast by a front porch spotlight.

Karl muttered "My bad." While everyone had made the same mistake at some point, Miker grumbled "rookie" from the front seat and we laughed.

The laughing stopped when we reached the fire.

"It's fully involved," Miker said. We stared out the engine's large windows. Only three months ago, we rarely encountered fully involved house fires because someone would call 911 at the first sight or smell of fire. Now no one went out at night, and fires too often grew massive before people noticed.

"There's a guy hanging out the third floor window," Karl said.

"He has a kid in his arms."

I cursed. Karl reached for the door handle.

"Do not open that door!" our squad leader, Lt. Helen Stivers, ordered.

Karl looked like he wanted to argue – hell, we all did – but we knew she was right. Helen had that weird mix of caring and kick-ass attitude found in all great leaders. During her three decades with the division, a few macho-cocky firefighters had defied her orders, but never twice. She once smashed a disobedient firefighter across the face with a tire iron. None of us would go against her.

"Forty-five seconds, boys," Helen said calmly, stating how long it took our engine's booms and remote spotlights to properly deploy. Once arrayed, the lights made it difficult for shadows to exist in our field of operation. "Keep a good watch," she ordered.

So we searched for rippers. Our spotlights star-brighted the neighborhood until the fire receded to a dull glow, as if cowering before our power. Lights also shone in the houses around us, showcasing people peeking from behind the security blankets of their curtains and blinds. In the house across the street, a picture window framed a pink-robed woman kneeling in prayer.

"The guy's screaming," Karl whispered, stating the obvious as all rookies did. I looked at the dying man, sickness gagging my throat. Helen counted the seconds out loud – 15, 16, 17, 18 –

steeling our nerves and hers – as the superheated air boiling out the window cooked the man alive.

To the man's credit, he didn't let go of the little girl, holding her clear so the heat and smoke couldn't reach her. After a final pleading glance at us, the man's strangled face disappeared completely into the smoke. Only his arms hung down from the spewing clouds, like an unknown god debating whether to spare the girl's life.

"29, 30, damn it, we can't wait," Helen yelled. "Go!"

Karl opened the door and we sprinted toward the house. The man's grip had weakened so he barely held the screaming girl. She was small, a toddler, and Karl and I held out our hands to catch her. But as she fell the tall blackness of a ripper rose from the ground beside us, protected from our spotlights by the barest sliver of a tree's shadow. The damn thing had been waiting there, hoping the man would drop the girl through its dark rip in space.

Trusting Karl to catch the girl, I flipped on my portable spotlight and illuminated the ripper. For a split second I saw another world through the ripper's body – a surreal scene of darkness upon darkness, of shadow creatures slipping here and there screaming unknown obscenities and begging for my soul. Then the combined illumination from my spotlight and the engine's lights overwhelmed the ripper and it singled out to nothing.

When I turned to Karl, he held the crying girl in his arms. She pushed away from his face, more afraid of his protective gear than the fire or ripper. I glanced up at the man's down-slung body as Helen and Miker grabbed a ladder to try and save him.

He was dead by the time we reached him.

After we extinguished the fire and sent the girl to the hospital, Helen told Karl he'd done good. Karl kept glancing at the dead man's sheet-covered body. Helen slugged the rookie in the arm to distract him.

"Least he didn't get sucked into that hell for the rest of his life," Karl muttered. "That's gotta be worse than burning alive."

As the wind shifted and blew across the sheeted man, carrying the greasy whiff of cooker-burnt meat, I prayed Karl was right.

After my shift I arrived home to discover my sixteen-year-old daughter Sammy slumped on the sofa, watching the news on her reader. I leaned over to hug her, but she shot a scowl which stopped my arms in mid reach.

She held up her reader with a disdainful flick of her wrist, showing me the video of the fire and ripper. Obviously one of the neighbors had filmed us last night.

"The man's name was Aaron Wills," Sammy said in the word-flattening voice she'd adopted since her mother was taken. "His wife was staying across town helping a sick relative. Their daughter's in Children's Hospital. Expected to recover."

"He was a brave man," I said. "You have to honor courage like that."

Sammy snorted, like she did anytime I mentioned an emotion or ideal not grounded in pure cynicism. For a moment I stared at her and didn't see her close-cropped hair – sheared off in the bathroom by her own hand – or the black ripper tattoo on her cheek – reaching for her right eye as if to pull her sight into another dimension. Instead, I saw Sammy as she'd been at nine, the girl with flowing red hair whom I'd tickle until she

laughed tears from her eyes. The girl who hugged me in a tight python grip before each shift, and always kissed my cheek as she whispered to be careful.

Now such love seemed beyond her. As if to taunt me, Sammy muttered how I should have let the ripper take the girl.

I couldn't believe she'd say that. "Why?"

"She'd have ended up doing something worthwhile with her life."

"And you know this..."

"A friend told me."

I groaned. If Sammy had spent the night talking to a ripper, I was going to get an earful from my mother-in-law.

I got an earful.

Turned out my mother-in-law caught Sammy talking to the ripper outside her bedroom window. Scared Arlene silly, seeing that monster in the backyard, Sammy grinning at it from the window like some idiot-struck firebug.

I tried telling Arlene not to worry. The ripper had appeared in our backyard for the last two weeks, but I'd installed spotlights outside Sammy's windows, which kept the damn thing several yards from the house. However, Arlene had no patience for my ideas of safety. "Never your fault, is it?" she asked, tired razor eyes slicing my words to ribbons. "What's your plan? Let the damn things take your whole family?"

I tensed, the exhausted part of me screaming to beat the crap out of her. But instead of giving in to anger, I took a deep breath as I looked at Arlene's tired face and instead saw my wife. Or, I saw what Carie would have looked like in another two decades, if we'd been allowed to grow old together. Red hair turned gray. Thin bones and muscles etched with strength and determination.

Arlene and I both knew Sammy's morbid fascination with the rippers resulted from her mother being killed by one. Well, not killed. Disappeared. Transformed. Whatever you called the painful things those creatures did to those they took.

When Sammy first talked to the ripper outside her window, I feared she'd let it in. For some reason, rippers only appeared when there was no light, and they wouldn't cross the simplest of barriers, whether a shut door, a closed glass window, or even a tent's fabric. They wouldn't follow ventilation shafts or bends and curves inside buildings, almost as if they were truly shadows which couldn't leave the path of whatever blocked their invisible light.

Some people said rippers didn't enter our houses out of a minor respect for humanity. Others searched for a scientific reason. But in the end, all that mattered was if you left a door open at night, or a window cracked more than a hair, a ripper might reach in and steal you away.

With such devils outside our homes, it's a wonder anyone slept at all. Even during the day, everyone looked numb and scared. Few worked their jobs anymore. Instead, people rushed out during the day to find food and supplies, and rushed back home before night fell.

I thanked Arlene for watching Sammy. Arlene sniffed and apologized for being so angry – "It's just the tired speaking," she said – and walked to her car.

"My fault," Sammy droned from the sofa after Arlene drove

away. "You said not to act weird while Gramie was here. 'Act weird.' Your words."

I winced at her accusation. Instead of taking the bait, I told Sammy not to worry about her grandmother. "She simply misses your mom."

If I expected Sammy to say she also missed her mother, that was expecting too much from my emotionally disconnected teenage daughter. Sammy stared at me blankly before returning to her reader.

Unable to take any more drama, I walked to my room, closed the door, and fell into bed to cry.

I met my wife two decades back. Carie was a successful artist who painted beautiful illustrations for children's books. She also spent her weekends volunteering as a rural firefighter. Her tiny department responded to car crashes and brush fires thirty minutes outside the city.

One night my department was called to assist Carie's. We arrived at a full-gone warehouse fire to see Carie dragging a fellow firefighter overcome by heat. I'll never forget the sight of that determined woman – red hair crowding her facemask as she dragged a man twice her size to the ambulance.

After we beat down the fire, Carie and I talked. Carie mentioned that when she wasn't volunteering with her department, she worked as a freelance artist. "My last book was *Boo Boo Gets a Choo Choo*," she said, wiping sweat and black soot from her face.

How could you not love someone like that?

Because of Carie's experience, she understood the dangers and stresses of my job. Where another spouse might have worried about my safety, Carie waved it off. In fact, I worried far more about her volunteer work than she ever did about me.

The rippers stole her on the night they first appeared. She'd been on a routine medical call, walking toward a house where a child had broken his arm, when a ripper appeared. Carie vanished before her squad could react. All they heard were her screams echoing from nothingness as the ripper tore and twisted her body and soul into things they were never meant to be.

I still wonder about the hell she was stolen away to.

I pray it's a nice place.

I cried until I fell asleep, and woke in the late afternoon. To my surprise, Sammy wasn't in her room or the backyard. Instead, I found her in the basement studio, painting on my wife's smart canvas. I almost yelled to get away from the canvas, but caught myself. Carie didn't need the computerized art system anymore, and if Sammy was still interested in painting, I should encourage her.

I walked over to see what she was painting, but Sammy raised her hand to stop me. All throughout Sammy's youth, Carie had spent hours each week painting with our daughter. Sammy had always kept her paintings a secret until they were finished, at which point she'd reveal her work with a dramatic flourish of her hands. I smiled at the memory, and assumed she was about to do this again.

Instead, I heard a computerized click, followed by the stylized swish of the canvas's trash being deleted. Sammy yanked the memory sliver from the canvas' control board and threw it to

the floor, crushing its crystal shape beneath her right boot.

I screamed, and shoved her away from the canvas. Part of me heard Sammy hit the basement wall, but I didn't care. I touched the smart canvas with my finger, pulling up the memory. Where before there had been hundreds of paintings created by Carie and my daughter, now there were none.

"What did you do?" I asked, my body shaking. That's when I noticed Sammy's nose bleeding from hitting the wall. Ever my daughter, she stood up as if she didn't hurt, smirking at my anger.

"It'll be over soon," she said nonchalantly, wiping her bloody nose with the back of her hand. Her blood sparkled starry highlights in the smart canvas' blue light.

"What'll be over? Your painting?"

"The rippers. They'll only be here a few more weeks."

I remembered my daughter's talks with the ripper outside her window. I chuckled nervously.

Sammy walked up the stairs, leaving me with the blank canvas. I tapped the controls and accessed the recovery program Carie had installed after a crash deleted one of her paintings. The canvas began rebuilding what was left of its remaining memory as I climbed the stairs to tell Sammy dinner would be ready in a half hour.

Our department ran on modified Kelly schedule, meaning I worked 48 hours straight with four days off. Even though I always slept soundly in a noisy firehouse, at home I couldn't rest. Every few hours I'd obsessively pace the house, making sure the windows and doors were closed tight.

Some time well after midnight I passed Sammy's door and heard her whispering. I didn't wish to disturb her privacy. But I also needed to apologize for what happened in the basement.

I knocked on the door, which creaked open. "Sammy, I wanted to..." I stopped, fear slamming the words from my mind. The spotlights I'd rigged outside Sammy's room were off, and her window stood wide open with a ripper filling half her room. Its flat body hovered like a shadow swollen on pain and fear.

I grabbed Sammy, hoping to throw her into the hallway before the ripper grabbed her. But instead of taking my daughter, the ripper inhaled deeply – for lack of a better word – and sucked its shadow back out the window. For a fleeting moment I saw the ripper's portal. Saw its light-gone world, where shadow nightmares flickered and howled – creatures which my body felt more than saw. Then the ripper was gone.

I slammed the window and latched it shut. Sammy turned the bedroom lights on as the worst shakes since Carie's abduction hit me.

Fury ran Sammy's face. "You dumb asshole," she screamed, kicking me hard. "That was Mom."

"Carie?" I stammered. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Sammy looked at me like I was slow, and maybe I was. "That ripper is Mom," she said. "Or what's left of Mom, after the rippers changed her."

"Sammy, it's trying to trick you. It wants to snatch you away."

Sammy kicked her bedroom wall, leaving a dent in the plaster. She took a deep breath to calm herself. "Do you know why rippers take people?"

I waited for Sammy to say what she knew. After all, why

rippers kidnapped people was the only question worth asking in today's world.

"Well?" I finally asked.

"Well what?"

"Why do they take people?"

Sammy giggled. "You'll just have to find out."

That made no sense, just like so many of my conversations with Sammy since her mother disappeared. In my mind I laughed, I cried, I screamed. I wanted to embrace her in a massive hug until some sense entered her mind – to tell her it wasn't her fault or mine that her mother was gone. But I also knew that to Sammy, everything she said made perfect sense, which only frustrated me even more.

I looked out the window. The ripper had disappeared back into the dark. I also noticed both outside spotlights laying on the ground. Sammy must have knocked them down after opening her window.

I told Sammy to leave the bedroom light on until morning so the ripper wouldn't return. Sammy bit her lower lip. "I suppose you're mad," she said.

"You suppose?"

Sammy sighed. "Mom wouldn't hurt me. She simply misses me."

I hugged her gently and told her to go to bed. As I walked down the hall to my bedroom, I heard Sammy say in her soft, low voice, "I can't be here forever, you know."

I didn't know if she was still talking to me, or if she was muttering at the ripper again. But I didn't stop to find out.

By the start of my next shift, Arlene had gotten a few good nights sleep and was in a better mood. "It's not the lack of sleeping that burns me," Arlene said. "It's the stress of knowing those things are out there – and that Sammy doesn't realize how dangerous they are."

I thanked her for all she'd done for me and Sammy, then showed her the key locks I'd installed on all the windows so Sammy couldn't open them. Arlene seemed satisfied by that, and said she'd see me when my shift was over.

At the fire station, Miker, Karl, and Helen sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee. I told them about the ripper, and how Sammy opened a window for it. The only thing I left out was how Sammy believed the ripper was Carie.

"Sammy's lucky," Helen said. "Most rippers, they get a shot at someone, they take it."

"I know. But I keep thinking about what Sammy said, that this ripper wouldn't hurt her. You ever hear of a ripper taking a special interest in someone? I mean, Sammy's been talking to the damn thing for weeks."

Helen lowered her voice. "One of my friends is high up in the FBI. She told me there have been quite a few cases of rippers talking with people. The problem is these people eventually jump into the ripper. So while most rippers are content to simply steal people, a few want to talk you into doing the deed."

Miker and Karl nodded knowingly, as if the two idiots hadn't been as clueless as me. From the limited interactions scientists had with rippers, we knew they were intelligent. But actually conversing with them was difficult. Most rippers wouldn't speak, and those few who did rarely made sense, sometimes claiming

to be friends and family, sometimes spinning lies as easily as truth. Sort of like when Sammy and I talked about anything deeper than what I was cooking for supper. Half the time we didn't understand what the other was truly saying.

Karl, being a typical probie and needing to be the center of attention, mentioned a neighbor who'd been taken a few days back. "People heard his screams up and down the block. What makes a person scream like that?"

We all shrugged. Whatever the rippers did to people, it hurt like hell.

"I think rippers have been here before," Helen said. "That's why our religions have so many depictions of devils and hells."

"Nonsense," Miker said. "Hell's a place of fire, not darkness."

This was too much for me to ponder. "Maybe I should put more spotlights in my backyard."

"False security," Helen said. "There's always going to be shadows those things can hide in."

"But why are they doing this?" Karl asked.

Helen muttered how better people than us had failed to understand the rippers' motives. Before she could say more, the fire bell rang, pushing our minds onto nothing but work.

During the day, the runs felt like old times. Car accidents. Heart attacks. False alarms at the few schools still open. But as the sun sank and the civilians rushed home, the fire station lost its timelessness and became a great smoldering stack of now. We closed the front doors. Flipped on the spotlights. The station beamed like the heart of the sun, illuminating several city blocks in our false security of hope.

I think if people could, we'd light the whole world so there'd no longer be night. But light can't remove every shadow.

There were no calls during the next few hours. Feeling daring, I opened the station's side door and stepped outside. As my eyes adjusted to the spotlights, I noticed a tiny sliver of shadow between two parked cars on the street. Holding my hand before my eyes like a shield, I walked toward the cars. Sure enough, the shadow there squirmed and quaked as a ripper tried in vain to reach me. The ripper smelled of musk and sandalwood, like the incense my wife used to burn while painting.

"Carie?" I asked.

The ripper floated around its box of shadow as the word "Yes" caressed my mind, a word mixed with the sensation of Carie hugging me tight. I wanted so badly to reach in and touch the ripper, to find out if it really was her. But I knew the ripper was merely trying to trick me.

"Why don't you like the light?" I asked, leaning over for a closer look. "Why don't you enter our homes?"

The ripper merely stared – if a faceless shadow can stare – before opening the portal to its world. As always the ripper world was pure darkness, but while my eyes couldn't see anything, my mind saw all too clearly. I watched helplessly as a woman fell through the ripped dark – red hair blowing, her screams building louder and louder as a thousand cutting shadows sliced in and out of her skin, twisting and tearing her to pieces. With a vomit sickness, I realized this was Carie. This was what happened to the woman I loved when the rippers stole her away.

But Carie wasn't dead. As the ripper caressed my mind, I felt my wife's lips on my own. "Why don't you and Sammy join

me?" she asked softly, her thoughts merging with mine. "I miss you something bad."

I stumbled back, falling to the sidewalk as the ripper squirmed to escape its shadow prison. My legs wouldn't work – except to run toward Carie, to join her in darkness. Ignoring my wife's haunting needs, I crawled away, each inch and foot a battle to reach as Carie begged me to join her – the imagined smell and feel of her body beside mine smothering my every rational thought. Finally, I reached the firehouse door and crawled inside, slamming it shut as I shook and cursed.

Unfortunately, Helen happened upon me a few moments later and instantly knew I'd had a close call with a ripper. After letting me move past my shakes, she blessed me out, yelling that I'd better not be on some suicide trip. "You will not put this squad in danger," she warned.

"I won't," I said. "I was just curious about the damn things."

"And did you learn anything?" she asked sarcastically. I remembered her comment about better people than us not knowing what the rippers wanted. When I didn't answer – not daring to mention that my wife might now be a ripper – Helen walked away shaking her head, obviously irritated.

Once I was alone, I called Arlene to check on Sammy. Arlene said Sammy had already gone to bed, even though it was barely ten o'clock. I thanked my mother-in-law, and told her I'd swing by the house in the morning. While I didn't mention it to Arlene, I wanted to talk with Sammy about this ripper. About whether or not it might truly be Carie.

The entire squad felt squirrely that night, so around midnight we boarded our engine and drove the traffic-emptied streets, the only vehicles we passed an occasional police car or ambulance. We responded to a heart attack call shortly after 2AM, but otherwise the night was quiet.

We were driving back to the station when Sammy called my cell phone. It was strange for Sammy to call in the middle of the night; more so when she didn't speak. I listened to the silent phone and heard crickets chirping and the wind blowing over the receiver. Then my mother-in-law screamed, "Get away from her!"

They were outside. I knew from the shiver which ran down my spine Sammy had gone outside to talk to that damn ripper.

Helen asked what was wrong. I couldn't talk. I couldn't say what I knew. "My house," I gagged. Helen motioned for Miker to crank the lights and sirens as we raced to my neighborhood.

"Don't be mad, Dad," Sammy whispered over the receiver. Her phone hit the ground, followed by the summertime silence of insects and wind. I heard my little girl scream in horrible pain, a sound which echoed far longer than any parent should ever be forced to hear.

"It's okay," I whispered, even though Sammy was no longer listening. "I'm on my way."

We arrived to find my mother-in-law crying on the front lawn, oblivious to the dangers around her. We lit the scene and I asked where Sammy was. Arlene pointed to the grass beside my boots.

There lay Sammy's cell, the line still open and connected to my phone.

How do you grieve for those who might be dead, or might be alive? Who might return, or might never be seen again?

Helen told me to take all the family leave I needed, but there was nothing for me at home but tears for a daughter and wife whom I hoped still lived on the ripper's dark-hell world.

Arlene told me she'd checked on Sammy in the middle of the night and found her asleep. She'd then gone to the bathroom, at which point Sammy ran outside to talk to the ripper. Arlene chased her, but the ripper only wanted Sammy.

I told Arlene it wasn't her fault, but she didn't believe me. After she went home, I wandered my empty house, feeling Sammy's lingering presence. Her bed covers turned down. The slight indentation from her head in the pillow.

In the basement art studio, the smart canvas glowed its usual blue light. A message said the retrieval system had recovered the last painting viewed, probably whatever Sammy had been looking at before she deleted and destroyed everything else.

My finger hovered over the VIEW button, but I couldn't handle the past right now. I told the canvas to save the painting and walked back upstairs.

At the start of the next shift I returned to the fire station, grateful to be around the only family I had left.

The next two weeks passed with numbing speed. Helen kept a close watch on me, afraid I'd go suicidal, and to my shock I considered it. On night-time runs, I obsessively watched the rippers flickering just beyond our spotlights. I found myself edging toward the damn things, wondering if I had the guts to follow my family. Wondering if Carie and Sammy were among the rippers prowling around us.

To keep me safe, Helen stuck me with routine tasks like manning the apparatus controls. She and the squad also refused to leave me alone for even a few minutes.

Then came the shelter fire.

The fire broke out in an abandoned megastore converted to a shelter for people with nowhere to escape the rippers. Because it was night, the people inside were afraid to leave the building, even with the fire beating down on them. They stampeded to rooms not filled with smoke and flames and waited for us to save them.

We were the second engine to arrive. After setting up our spotlights, Helen ordered Miker and Karl to enter an emergency door and do a quick check. Less than a minute later, they dragged two young men out.

"We heard more people yelling," Karl said as the EMTs began working on the victims.

Helen glanced at me, trying to decide if I was together enough to risk going into the building. "Okay, we four go in, find as many people as we can, get them out."

Karl and Miker nodded and walked back in. Helen checked my air supply and facemask and muttered "Don't screw us up." I breathed a cool swallow of bottled air and followed her in.

The billowing smoke was so thick I couldn't see. I heard myself breathing, always breathing, and heard the roar of the fire, a raspy "Sammy, Sammy" which boomed louder and louder the deeper we walked. Just when I thought we wouldn't find anyone, a faint cry echoed across me. I grabbed Helen and pulled her toward the sound. We entered a new room to find five people

huddled beside an emergency exit. They crouched against the tile floor, breathing what little good air was left.

Helen reached for the emergency door release, but one of the women stopped her. "Rippers," the woman yelled. "Just outside. They already got one of us."

Helen waved me closer as she radioed in our position and situation. The smoke was building, the heat rising. This spot wouldn't be safe much longer. "We can't take them back through all that smoke," Helen yelled.

I pushed against the door release to test it, opening it slightly and closing it again. "We wait," I yelled. "Let them bring spotlights to this side of the building."

But waiting is hard with hell screaming over your shoulder. We passed our facemasks around, letting the men and women take turns breathing clean air. But the smoke built up more and more, and the fire burned nearer and nearer. The spotlights still hadn't reached our door when an explosion knocked us off our feet. A flash of flame washed over us, and smoke filled the entire room.

"We go now!" Helen yelled as she grabbed a woman beside her. One of the men screamed he'd take his chances here, but I pulled him to his feet and aimed my spotlight at the door. Helen kicked the door open and we pushed the five people out as we shined our lights around, looking for rippers.

"Stay close," I yelled as we coughed in the chilled outside air. Each tree and bush and blade of grass cast a flickering sliver of dark. An engine's spotlights sliced the smoke from around the corner of the building, barely a hundred feet away.

"Go!" Helen yelled. We ran for the light, Helen in the lead, me bringing up the rear and pushing the scared people along. A tall woman ran next to Helen, and as we neared the spotlights I saw she had red hair. But just as I noticed such a worthless detail, the woman disappeared, the barest shimmer of a ripper standing in her place. Her screams echoed across the dark empty all around us.

"Get away," one of the men yelled. He panicked, slamming me against the side of the building, my helmet hitting hard on the cinderblock wall. I collapsed – dazed – as the man bolted across the shadowed night and fell into another ripper. I again saw a glimpse of that dark world as the man begged for mercy. Then Helen stood before my face and pulled me up.

The other two men and one woman we'd been trying to rescue stayed with us, and Helen placed them between us and our spotlights. She talked the civilians through their fear – "Just keep going, we've got you" – until her light crashed to the ground, a ripper vanishing from where Helen had stood. As I would have expected of Helen, she didn't scream at whatever the ripper did to her. Only a single, pained groan floated through the air, followed by silence.

I threw my spotlight at the vanishing ripper. "Go ahead," I yelled. "Take me."

A greater dark rose before my face, ripping space and time into whispers and tastes – the roar of the fire becoming Carie's body beside my own, the fire engines' comforting flashing lights becoming Sammy's final cry as the ripper stole her away. As my world disappeared into the ripper's darkness, my arms and legs tore into base strings of muscle. My throat spasmed once before being pulled through my mouth, even as it refused to

stop screaming. The ripper giggled, and I suddenly knew that worse was yet to come. It would merge our souls. Me into it, and it into me. Worse, the bastard would never stop laughing at what it'd done to me.

And then, just like that, the pain disappeared.

I remained partly inside the ripper, it in me, but the perverted amusement I'd felt moments before was gone. Instead, my daughter's monotone voice whispered, "It's okay, Dad."

The ripper seemed irritated at this interruption and tried to dispose of Sammy. But Sammy merely flicked herself from wherever she was and appeared alongside me in the ripper. For a moment the ripper's consciousness screamed before it was absorbed by Sammy – just like the ripper had been trying to do to me.

I fell to my knees, unable to understand what was going on. I was split between two worlds. I distantly felt the three people I'd been trying to save, who huddled around my body back on Earth. But I also floated on a world I couldn't begin to comprehend. Darkness surrounded me. My eyes were worthless, even as I saw millions of shadows circling and laughing and tearing into one another with wild abandon.

"I'm one of them," Sammy said, both of us sharing the ripper's body. "Mom promised I'd be with her if I came here."

And just like that, my wife's consciousness appeared in the ripper with me and Sammy. Carie hugged me, if I could say she still had arms to touch with. Instead, she and Sammy were ghosts, haunting the strange emptiness which was the ripper's body.

Seeing I didn't understand, they opened themselves to me.

I saw the rippers – ancient, powerful, their way of life completely alien to humanity. They traded consciousness the way we communicated words. Their shadow bodies were merely containers to hold an eternal parade of souls – souls which continually merged and changed with each interaction among the rippers. A strong consciousness might absorb a weaker, only to be enveloped by an even stronger soul moments later, and split into two new rippers the next second. But nothing was ever truly lost as the rippers merged and split and merged again.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Imagine we're talking," Sammy said. "Imagine human souls as simple words. Each time you spoke, your consciousness would go out, mixing with each person who heard you speak. As people repeated what you said, you'd continually be turned into something new. But you'd also remain. Changed. Different. But still partly you."

I shook my head, vertigo shoving my mind as I felt a renewed vision of Carie and Sammy holding me. But this wasn't the Carie and Sammy I remembered. I felt the hundreds of rippers which had already merged with them. While Carie and Sammy still loved me, they were also quite capable of tearing my soul to shreds for their own needs.

"You make it sound bad," Carie whispered in her dream of a voice. "But it's so simple: the rippers need an occasional infusion of new consciousness. This time they chose Earth. It's a true honor for humanity."

"Honor?" I asked, shocked at these creatures which were no longer my wife and daughter. "Rippers steal people. Tear them to pieces. And you call that honor? It's wrong. No other word.

Wrong.”

Sammy giggled. “Wrong’s a human creation. Rippers don’t understand the concept.”

I screamed as Carie and Sammy dug into my soul, each licking different pieces of me, each tasting and deciding which parts to take into their own beings. I knew I should simply give in. That this would let me live with them forever. But instead, a familiar anger built in me. I kicked and bit and hit and yelled, a ghost fighting ghosts. Unable to tell if this was truly my body or merely an illusion, but still refusing to give in.

Carie and Sammy paused.

“You don’t want to be with us?” Carie asked, hurt by my decision. The anguish of tears formed in my eyes, but I knew that wasn’t my emotion. It was hers. Theirs.

“No,” I said. “I won’t live like this.”

I thought Carie would be angry with me, but she only laughed. She danced her mind through the air like her fingers used to fly across her magical canvases. But instead of creating colors and pictures, this time the rippers swirled to her motions, each oblivious to the changes the humans they’d stolen were making to their world. Carie dipped her being into a passing ripper. An echo of her soul lodged in the creature, which had been about to snag the scared woman who still clung to my body back on Earth. The ripper released the woman and floated away, unsure why it now felt shame for the deed it’d almost done.

“This is art,” Carie said. “The deepest of arts.”

I remembered Carie sitting before the smart canvas in her studio, Sammy working at her side, and I was tempted to stay with them. So sorely tempted. But the Carie I loved would never have taken our daughter to a world like this. The Carie I knew was gone, and I didn’t like where what remained of her and Sammy were going.

“No,” I said again.

For the briefest of moments their souls locked together, swimming back and forth into each other, trading bits of themselves as they discussed my fate. Then Sammy, and Carie, kissed me on the cheek.

“We’ll miss you,” Sammy said, letting me see her a final time as the red-haired child python-hugging me before each shift.

Carie and Sammy stretched me and sewed me and stitched me back together before throwing me toward reality. I woke to find the people from the fire still huddled around me in fear. I stood them up and told them everything would be okay. I then lead them toward the fire engine and the protection of its lights.

A few days later the rippers disappeared.

There are endless theories about what the rippers wanted, but I believe what Carie and Sammy showed me. That the rippers are built for darkness. Are unable to tolerate even the faintest light shining into their world. But the idea that they didn’t enter our homes and buildings out of respect for us is bullshit. They did that because it made the hunt more fun. Granting an illusion of safety made us more afraid – and the more we feared, the more the rippers enjoyed feasting on our final moments of agony.

I refuse to accept the rippers’ belief that ‘wrong’ is merely a human creation. Now that I’ve been to their world, I know their way of life is wrong. Absolutely wrong. Until I die I’ll scream this simple truth.

But maybe, just maybe, the rippers can be forced to change.

After returning home from fighting the shelter fire, I slept for two days. When I finally woke, I wandered into the basement, where the smart canvas glowed its gentle blue light.

I pulled up the single piece of art the canvas had recovered. It was a finger-painting of our family, created by Sammy when she was only six. Carie stood beside me – red hair down to her shoulders, her outsized-drawn hand holding my hand. On the other side of me stood Sammy, a giant green grin touching both of her circle-face cheeks. Her cartoon hand also held mine.

I smiled, feeling echoing smiles from the remnants of Carie and Sammy now living inside me.

I wondered what Carie and Sammy would be like, years from now if the rippers ever returned. Maybe the art they hoped to create would actually work. Maybe we scared humans really could change the rippers. Maybe whatever remained of my wife and daughter would be the conscience which finally stopped the rippers from doing such evil.

Or maybe I’m lying to myself, afraid to see the truth of life.

Seeing no choice but to keep to my flicker of hope, I saved Sammy’s painting and shut off the canvas. I then walked back into the night to see if the station needed me to work an extra shift.

Jason Sanford published two stories last year in *Interzone* – one won the 2008 Readers’ Poll and the other was reprinted in *Year’s Best SF 14*. Last issue we published his novella ‘Sublimation Angels’ and we have a couple more stories on file. His website is jasonsanford.com.



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Rebecca J. Payne

I stood on the centre of the deck, wood creaking beneath my feet. I could feel the faint pulse of the ship through the worn-down soles of my boots. Slowly, I tethered a length of rope to the wheel to set our dawn course and, breathing on my fingers for warmth, watched the silvery mainsail as it billowed above, glowing bright against the night sky. Summer nights were too short, and just as cold as winter once you sailed high enough. On our starboard side long wisps of white rose up as our bow cut through a ridge of cloud; tendrils of vapour curled their way around our hull, countless drops of water illuminated by the light of our sails. For a second I allowed my tired eyes to close, and I could still see pale ghosts of them, dancing against the darkness.

"Adia, are we clear ahead?" I called out. As fast as we were sailing west, the night was close to ending. We could little afford to lose time in cloudfall. In the northeast, the cluster of bright stars that gave form to Auriga the Charioteer were in ascension; soon the rising sun would reclaim the sky and our sails would run slack without Auriga's light. Long days were the domain of the Burning Man and those below who worshipped him. Our gods of night were eternal, beautiful. Peaceful.

I heard Adia's footsteps skipping down from the bow where she had been watching the distant lights of other Aurigan ships. She ducked around the mast and smiled up at me.

"All clear 'til the day catches us," she said, her breath trailing off into the air. Her face was framed by thick black hair, cut short in the spring but now long enough to be ruffled by the wind that played with the collar of her black jacket. Her skin, in the light of the sails, radiated its own cold beauty, and for a moment I wondered what she had ever seen in me.

"We're closer to the fleet tonight," she said. "They're crowded together in the northwest. Twenty-five families as I can make out, and most of the tall workshops."

I turned back to the wheel and made a show of tugging at the rope. I often wondered if she regretted coming with me, if she thought of her parents or brothers at all. The ship was holding steady for now.

"It's almost midsummer," I said. "Everyone's returning for the Feast of Feathers." The pit of my stomach lurched, whether through hunger or revulsion I wasn't sure. Adia moved beside me and I felt the weight of her slight frame against mine, her cheek resting on my shoulder.



"It could be a wedding, or a shipfitting... Remember how sometimes the whole fleet would come together just for the sake of it...just to dance, or..."

She went to take my hand in hers but I pulled away, bending down to pick up the lightjar that sat at the foot of the wheel, the crumpled pieces of old sail inside glowing brightly.

"I'll look at the charts, find us a new course. Somewhere north. The nights will be shorter, but we can do with less light if we don't need to sail fast."

"You should rest," she sighed. "You haven't slept for days. I can track the fleet until dawn, anchor if they anchor."

"We're too close," I lied, and turned away before she could give me that look, the one that said she knew the truth as well as I – they would never attack us. Not out of any affection or duty towards Adia and me, but because our ship's heart beat in time with theirs. Our figurehead, the two blessed goats, marked us as their own; our sails were filled with the same sacred light of Auriga.

"Please rest," she called after me, and I felt like the worst kind of captain and the worst kind of lover, one who can't admit to being wrong.

As I slunk across the deck to the cabin door I caught sight of Polaris, high in the north, and a memory rushed over me like a wave. I was sitting atop my grandfather's shoulders on the deck of our old family ship, clinging on to his thick neck for dear life as night winds howled around us. He had told me that living on the topside was a blessing, not because of the Charioteer, but because Polaris guided us above all other stars. He pointed north to the Heavens and swore that I must never repeat his words. *My father died, he whispered, in battle with the bullships over the skies of Amerika, and though I were just a lad left all alone on this ship, I asked steadfast Polaris to guide me home to where our people flocked beneath Auriga; Old Polaris is the equal of Capella, and though He has grown dim with age, He still holds light to fill a thousand empty sails.* I was too young, then, to understand what heresy was, but I understood that it was our secret. I asked him if the Lighters on the underside had stars like Polaris and Capella. *I think not, child, and frankly I don't much care.*

The memory faded, and I could now see the shining sails of the Aurigan fleet, glittering some way off in the distance. They must have seen us, too – not just that night, but a hundred nights before. One winter, just after dusk, when I had fallen asleep at

the helm, an Aurigan battleship had approached us; it was close enough to open fire before we could turn and flee, but its guns were not even drawn. Maybe they believed that if they waited long enough, they would reclaim their ship intact. After all this time, they still thought we might come back.

The lightjar cast a pale glow as I descended into the cabin. There was something about the warm and clammy air below deck that comforted and smothered at the same time. Our living quarters were far larger than the two of us could ever need – a family was meant to be living here, not us. Adia's family, I reminded myself.

I set the lightjar on the table where my charts of the Heavens were pinned down, and pulled up an old chair. As soon as the weight was lifted from my feet my whole body sank with gratitude. I felt old – older than my twenty-four years. My eyes closed again and for a moment I was falling like a dead weight; when I opened them, the charts were nothing but a blur of lines and smudges drifting before me.

I blinked, and blinked again. It didn't help. My body was crying out for food and sleep. The smell of boiled linemoss drifted in from the galley, and suddenly I was five years old, running through the coldrooms in the dark damp belly of my family ship, the long strings of linemoss hanging down from the ceiling like strands of a spider's web. I would spend hours there, hiding from my parents, thinking of how I could weave the strings together to make patterns. I'd play until I got too hungry, and when I'd come shuffling up the stairs, asking for dinner, my father would shout *that child smells of nothing but wretched linemoss*, and he'd beat me with his belt until he drew blood. So I learned to stay down in the coldrooms, and eat growing moss raw from the string, and not come up until he was asleep.

I remembered how I'd curl up in the corner of the room in the lowest part of the ship and imagine that I could feel us climbing as high as the moon, or as far down as the valleys on the ground itself. When we did sail low, to snare fruit from trees or fetch clean water, there would sometimes be a *thump, thump, thump* against the bottom of the ship. I thought we were touching the treetops and were, for the briefest of moments, connected through the branches and trunks and roots and dirt all the way down to the heart of the earth. When I was nine, a Lieutenant on my first workshop took great delight in telling me the truth; that it was the sound of Grounders firing arrows as we passed by. From then on, the sound haunted me, and I could never bear to be down in those rooms again. Seven years later, on deck one morning in the harsh winter sunlight, I saw a friend's skull split open by one of those arrows as he leant over the side to catch a pigeon.

I ran my hands over my eyes as if that would scrub away the memory. I didn't want to anchor, not while we were over Europa, but we had to store light in our sails if we were to go north with enough speed. In the beginning, when times had been good, Adia and I had often spoken of sailing south, somewhere wild and unknown; but leaving the fleet meant leaving behind the fragile protection of their presence. The skies over the equator swarmed with Taurans, Hydrans and other dangers. So we stayed in this strange half-life of ours, a ghost on the horizon of the Aurigan fleet, and with each passing season I worried more and more that they would one day tire of tolerating our games and

send a crew to board us, forcing us home. So north it was, for now at least, where the Ursa tribes kept to themselves and we could ride out the rest of the long days until autumn.

The darkest voices inside told me the bullships would find us wherever we went, some kind of punishment for trying to run, something I deserved. They were just weary, angry thoughts. I stood up, reluctantly, and went to the galley.

The galley walls were stained red where a fire had spread years ago. The ship had never fully healed. I had tried to hide the scars with damsonberry dye but the lightjar illuminated them, dark patches of rough timber, bold and clear. The strong smell of the linemoss in its pot suddenly made me ill. In the cupboard above there were strips of cured beef, hanging like leather thongs, and I took one and bit into it, cursing the overpowering taste of salt. Before we could go north we'd have to find a merchant ship and trade for fresh supplies. I realised I didn't know how much we had to sell – I hadn't brought down the stonetrap for days. The thought of climbing the mast turned my arms to lead and I had to force myself to take another bite. We still had some spices from our last journey over southern Aysa in the hold, which would sell for some meat and grain at least; Adia had been working on new cloth but I realised I didn't know what kind, nor whether it was in any state to trade. It had been weeks since I had asked her.

I took a cup from its hook and poured water from the flask that hung by the stove. It tasted old but I was too thirsty to care. I drained the cup and took a deep breath, my head suddenly pounding like the pulse of a ship in full flight, and I stumbled towards the stairs down to our bedroom.

I collapsed onto the bed like a sail whose lines had all been cut to ribbons. The sheets were musty, and as I kicked off my boots, I could smell the linemoss still, infused in my clothes and in my skin. I pulled the sheets around me and that small cocoon of thin cotton became the most welcome place I could imagine, dark and warm and alone.

At first I dreamt of waking, of walking out onto the deck under a low afternoon sun to find the whole Aurigan fleet surrounding us. Adia was standing with her family, embracing Sam, the man she should have married; she was weeping and professing her repentance and shame. I had no heart to blame her for taking us back. I blamed myself. I would have run away with or without her.

I was hauled over thick boarding planks to a tall workshop, rope binding my hands, resigned to whatever my fate might be. The mob jostled and pushed. I heard the sound of the workbell tolling and the people moved away. I looked down at my hands and they were small – I was only ten, back in my drab workshop clothes, and the rope was twisted around my fingers, half in knots. I looked up at the mass of rope that hung overhead, hundreds and hundreds of knotted lines crossing over and over again, suspended by tethers that ran up to the masts. Other workers were mending sections of the net, tying on more and more pieces. I felt the jolt of an elbow in my back. I turned, and Lieutenant Heller glared down at me, baring his teeth.

"Finish that line, you heretic child, or you'll eat nothing for a week!"

I looked back at the thin rope in my hands. The knots were tied around my fingers, not between, and I couldn't move them,

couldn't pull my hands apart...

"I can't!" I cried out, but Heller wasn't there, and when I looked up the net was hung between our ship and the next, anchored at its top corners by thick leather straps on either side, its body rolled up and held by tethers waiting to be cut. And to port were two ships with another net between them, and to starboard were two more...and the people on the other ships began to play music, and suddenly our ship was full of people dancing, singing, drinking. All the ships of the fleet were there, decks adorned with paper effigies of bulls and scorpions and snakes that children would burn at sunset to keep monsters at bay. The skies beyond were a clear expanse of brilliant blue. A priest was standing near our bow, elegant and pristine in white. He raised his soft hands up to the workers.

"For three nights we have anchored and fasted, as the Charioteer demands," he said. "Now see how our sails are filled with His good light! The longest of days seems like a curse upon us, but generous Auriga blesses us still. Today is midsummer – the day on which we are permitted to accept this bounty, so let us not waste time! By sunset all Aurigans will be eating well and thanking you for your tireless work. Father Auriga, we honour you with the Feast of Feathers."

I felt sick. I couldn't be here again. Thrown off my family's ship the day my grandfather died, I'd been taken to a workshop and told that the rest of my life would be spent there. I was no good for marrying and would never be allowed a family and a ship of my own. The workshop cabins were filled with dozens of others like me crammed on board in tiny bunks, all starving and living together in darkness as we worked on those nets, and not once did I ask what it was all for...

The ships lurched downwards in unison. The people around me cheered, and the tethers of the net were cut and it fell open, spreading out in the sky between the ships. I realised that in all my young years I had never gone on deck to watch the midsummer festival; I was always hiding in the coldrooms, or listening to my grandfather tell tall stories in the galley, and when we had supper and they called it a feast I didn't ask what it meant, I was just glad that my father was in a pleasant mood for once...

I wanted to shake myself, tell myself that it was all so long ago, but I couldn't escape the nightmare. The ships levelled off and up ahead I could see birds flocking in their tens of thousands, finches and starlings and countless others, and I wanted to shout out as we sailed towards them, but I froze. Their flocks broke and panicked; some flew above us and swooped away, but others tried to fly down, and they couldn't escape the nets, and I could hear thousands of birds screaming, thousands of wings beating helplessly, the sound of death growing louder and louder until finally I screamed with them.

Men sprang into action, hauling up the limp ropes that tied the bottom of the net to the bow of the ship, and the net closed like a giant hand, crushing the poor birds together. I closed my eyes and put my hands over my ears, but I could still feel it happening. When I looked again the net was on our deck, and the workers were cutting its ropes, pulling out birds from its tangles and breaking their necks. Children younger than me were ripping out feathers in wild clumps and throwing their broken bodies into large baskets to be cooked. I could feel Heller's gaze burning into my back, and I walked to the net, carefully unwinding a

cord from the still-warm body of a small grey bird. I could feel its tiny heartbeat racing in my palms. Its wings were unbroken, but it was too afraid to struggle, and as my hands closed around it, it trembled, trembled and trembled, and I began to cry. I ran to starboard and threw my hands up and over the side of the ship, and I watched as the grey bird took flight away from us, far away, towards the sun.

A bell woke me, distant but clear. I pushed myself from my bed. Sleep normally took longer to leave me, but I needed air, and we needed food.

Up on deck, Adia was steering us south at a slow decline towards the anchored tradeship; its merchant bell was still ringing out, calling us in. Adia had lowered the small topsail to help us sink and raised the yellow flag of trade. The sun was halfway high and the mainsail was running on nothing but afterglow as we crept slowly across the skies. I walked up behind Adia and put my hand on her waist. She jumped and let out a quiet squeak.

"Make ready the anchor," I said with a grin and kissed her on the cheek. I didn't know if she'd forgiven me. "I need to bring down the trap."

"There isn't time!" Adia sighed, but I was already climbing the mast, my whole body feeling refreshed from the hours of rest I had needed. As I looked across the horizon I saw no sign of the Aurigan fleet. My heart began to beat faster as I pulled myself to the very top, reaching across the lines to the stonetrap and unhooking it. I clipped it to my belt and paused, just looking out at the majestic clouds, the ever-changing mountains of our landscape. I pitied anyone who saw the same hills or valleys every day of their lives. There were large waves of heavy cloud in the west, barreling together to form nebulae much deeper and longer than our small ship; small ripples high above us softened the perfect pale blue of the morning, carried along by the tide of the southwesterly wind. Behind us in the east another ship was approaching, far off but moving quickly, called in by the merchant bell. I thought of something my grandfather had said: *the gods are always there, even in the daylight, even if we can't see them*. I looked to the north and wondered if Polaris was somewhere behind the fathoms of blue.

By the time I climbed back down, Adia had steered us beside the tradeship. I heard the thud of our anchor hitting the ground below as she set free the chain that held it. Our ship bobbed and swayed for a moment before settling. We were closer to the ground than I liked, but there were no signs of any Grounder settlements, no smoke or cultivated fields. I vaguely recognised the merchant who was passing a boarding plank between our ships.

"Good day to you!" he said, and I immediately wanted to wipe the smile from his face. "What can I do for you this fine morning?"

Adia made pleasant talk with him while I emptied the stonetrap out over a bucket of water and watched the tiny star-like stones sink down, gleaming in the sunlight. It was a greater haul than we had had for a long time. I reached in and picked out a blueish stone, turning it over and over in my fingers. It was so strange, the way little flecks of light rose from our sails in the night, binding together and becoming rough jewels. I scooped half of them up and wrapped them in a cloth. The stones would

be plenty – we could hold on to our spices for a better price.

I walked over to Adia, who was laughing at something the merchant had said. I recognised the laugh as the one she didn't really mean.

"Please, do come aboard," the merchant said, beckoning me over the boarding plank. I put my hand on Adia's shoulder.

"Back soon," I whispered.

As I stood at one end of the broad plank, I forced myself to hold my breath and look straight ahead. You couldn't show weakness to a merchant. As I put one foot in front of the other the dizzying sensation of being so close to the ground, close enough to make out movement in the long grass if I dared look down, threatened to overwhelm me. I didn't breath again until I reached the other side.

As we descended below deck the merchant continued his patter. "Lucky you came by; we are heading east tonight. You won't find goods so fresh from any other tradeship near here, certainly not!" He rattled on as we entered the dingy cabin, walls crammed with shelves of jars and old boxes. The room smelled of too many things at once. A dozen crates cluttered the floor, stood on end to form makeshift stands; most of them were covered in dusty sheets, with jars and bowls of the least rancid-looking goods on display. In one vase stood several wilting purple flowers. The merchant tapped a jar, half full of yellowish orbs bobbing in a green-tinged liquid.

"Know what these are?"

I shook my head.

"Eggs! Keep for a long time if you pickle 'em. Tasty, too." He unscrewed the lid and the smell of the liquid hit my nostrils like squalid water. "Want to try one?" I shook my head. I didn't want to open my mouth to speak until he put the lid back on. "Fair enough," he shrugged, "not to everyone's taste."

"We want meat and grain," I said, looking around at the stock and wondering how desperate we truly were.

"I have fresh cured beef, brand new! Small farmers over in Bavar, very civil people. Trade with no-one but me."

I took ten stones from my bag and dropped them into his palm. There was no need to trade everything we had, not to a man my gut told me not to trust. "Nothing rotten," I said. "These are good."

He studied the stones closely. "Sapphires. Well, I do have plenty at the moment. Some of your fellow tribesmen were passing through only yesterday. But I'm sure you knew that." He gave me the strangest look, as if he were waiting for me to apologise. I cleared my throat.

"And we want cotton," I said, suddenly remembering Adia's work. "If you'd traded for Aurigan stones yesterday you wouldn't have called us in. Which means if the fleet did stop, they only traded you spare supplies, not stones. So meat, grain and cotton, if you don't mind." I allowed myself to smile as the merchant's fixed grin began to strain.

"Very well." He turned to the door that lead to the coldrooms and called down. "Hans, bring up the new beef!"

The deckhand appeared from below carrying a wooden chest. Suddenly I remembered why the merchant had sat badly in my memory – I could tell from his clothes that the deckhand was a Grounder. A Grounder on a Lightship. The tradeship's mast was ringed in bronze with the belt of Orion – how could the

Hunter tolerate it? The Grounder glared at me as he started to unpack what looked like dried beef from the chest into a smaller wooden box. The merchant himself was scooping grain from a sack in the corner into small bags, weighing each one on old iron scales with an exaggerated frown.

"You're those two, aren't you?" he said after a while, dropping a further weight onto the scales, watching them teeter.

"What two?"

"You know. Of the Aurigan fleet, but not of the Aurigan fleet." He turned and grinned at me. I wanted to know how he knew; if the fleet really had stopped, if someone had talked about us.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course. You couldn't be them." He turned back to the scales. "Why would runaways still be creeping along in the wake of their old pals?"

From somewhere in the room I heard a strange noise, and a bird walked out from behind the coldroom door – fat and brown-feathered, making a clucking sound, just wandering free.

"What in the name of the Heavens is that?"

The merchant laughed. "Just a hen, that's all. Good layer of eggs if you're interested. And when the damn things stop producing, you can cook and eat 'em." The Grounder pretended to kick out at the bird and they both laughed as it squawked and ran around the crates, panicking. I felt my hands bunch into fists.

"Why doesn't it fly away?"

He shrugged. "Maybe it doesn't know it can." The merchant handed the bags of grain to the deckhand, who packed them into a sack with the box. "Ten stones gets you one box of beef and four bags of grain. Only cotton I got is unspun."

"Not a problem," I said. He pulled an old red box from a shelf and opened it, taking out large fistfuls of lumpy white cotton and tossing them into the sack. The deckhand slunk back down to the coldrooms without a word.

I looked over at the hen, still wandering aimlessly among the crates.

"Now," the merchant said, "are you sure there's nothing more I can do for you?"

Out on deck I stepped right up to the boarding plank, my desire to get off the ship overcoming the nausea of seeing the ground so close. I walked quickly, the sack in one hand balancing the caged hen in the other. As I stepped down, and heard the merchant drag the plank back across, Adia stared at me open-mouthed.

"I can explain," I said.

She shook her head. "I can't wait to hear it."

We raised anchor and started to climb back to our western course. The ship's pulse felt heavy. I wanted to take us high enough to skim the top of the large cloud system up ahead – we could use its buoyancy to take some of our weight, resting our sails as much as we could without stopping. Below us I could see the tradeship sailing low towards forests in the south. It was said that merchants built docks into trees to carry their goods down. The Grounders only tolerated them so they could buy our stones.

As we climbed, Adia was staring into the hen's cage and the hen was staring back with beady black eyes.

"Eggs?" she said, uncertainty in her voice.

"We either boil or fry them. Fresh," I added. "I'm not picketing

them, or whatever he said it was."

"But we don't eat the hen."

"Of course not."

Adia sighed. "You eat meat from the ground. Why is it any different?"

"It just is," I said. "It has wings. It's like...it's one of us."

Beneath my hand the ship's heartbeat started to race. I glanced behind, recalling that another ship in the east had been heading this way. Why would the merchant move on if more customers were coming? I raised my hand to block the glare of the sun and looked again. The ship was much closer now, close enough to make out its figurehead. It was unmistakable – the gleam of a bronze bull.

"Adia!" I called out. She turned to look. The bullship was moving fast, its sails still relatively bright. They weren't changing course to follow the tradeship. There was no doubt. The Taurans were coming for us.

"Topsail, now!" I shouted, retaking the wheel. I looked across the skies, praying for some sight of another Aurigan ship, anything that would make them think twice about their pursuit. There was nothing. The topsail went up but it made little difference, giving us more altitude but no speed. The bullship was big, triple-sailed, and gaining ground too quickly. As I turned to look again I heard the dreaded sound of guns being run out.

I spun the wheel furiously, turning to port with such violence that I almost skidded over. The hen in its cage was squawking and flapping. The bullship was looming now, and as I heard the first boom of their cannons I wondered how long they had been following us; if the merchant had set us up; if there was anything left to do but die.

"We can't outrun it!" Adia cried out. I looked up at our sails. Auriga's light had all but faded. A cannonball whistled past and dipped over our starboard side, falling away to the ground.

"They won't waste too many of those on us," I said, pulling hard to starboard again and pointing us west. We had almost reached the mass of cloud – if we could just skim its surface, pick up some speed, get out of their range...

"It's not our fight, it's not our fight!" Adia shouted into the sky, and I wanted to shout too, as if we could give the Taurans what they wanted; as if we could take Elnath from our pockets, place it in their palms and swear never to lay claim to it again...

As we cut into the cloud I heard the throaty boom of cannon fire again, and this time it was answered by a rending in our hull, ripping a hole through our stern, sending us into a sharp dive. The blast knocked me forward onto the wheel and I felt my knee give way. Adia screamed and fell and I heard the ship let out a long moan as its wooden skeleton was wrenched by the blast. The cloud enveloped us, and I could feel it rush into the lower decks of the ship, filling them and stopping our freefall.

Our sails went dead. The cloud was so thick I could barely see my hand in front of me. The only sound was the gentle creaking of our hull. I crouched down onto the deck, where the cloud was thinner, and I could just see the outline of Adia's back. I crawled over to her. She was holding her head in her hands, blood trickling from a wound just above her left eye. I held my finger to my lips and she nodded. It was not the first time we'd used cloudfall to fool an enemy. I could feel my blood pumping through my veins as the shadow of a great hull passed over us, and held my breath.

From somewhere above a voice boomed out.

"In the holy name of Taurus, renounce your claim to Elnath and we shall let you live!" The laughter of the ship's crew told me their captain was lying. They would not look for us for long, though; in cloudfall they risked ramming us and dooming both our ships. Perhaps they would follow the tradeship after all. They said that Taurans were pirates as well as murderers.

The shadow moved on, and as I looked at Adia, we broke the silence with nervous laughter, the joy of the newly reprieved.

"I love you," I said, "and I'm so sorry."

We lay in bed together. It was such a rare thing. The cloud still filled much of the ship and we let it carry us along wherever it was heading, waiting for the stern to begin to heal, waiting for dusk.

The mist covered the floor of our bedroom and in the glow of the lightjar it seemed otherworldly, as if there were nothing beyond our limbo of endless white, nothing but the two of us in the whole of the skies. I felt Adia's hand move over my back, tracing the lines of the lashes I had taken for sparing that grey bird, lines that had not faded in fourteen years.

"I remember the first time I saw you," she said. "You were working on the ship-fitting crew. I knew that Sam and I were being given that ship for our family, and I used to sneak out from the weaving cabins of the bridalship, and go up to the deck to spy on what you were doing. You were fitting the ship so close by, and I thought – it's strange, all those people working for my wedding present, all so that Sam and I can raise a family. Why was I the one chosen for this? What if I don't like Sam once I get to know him? What if I can't bear children – will they take the ship back? All these stupid thoughts running through my mind, and there you were, sanding down the deck of my new ship where the wood had healed over, and I wondered who you were, and why you looked so sad."

I turned over and kissed her hand. "I knew, from the moment they gave me the job, that I was going to take that ship. I had to get away. I just..." I hesitated. It felt foolish to say such things out loud. "If you hadn't come with me, I would be lost. So lost."

"We are lost," she said with a smile, and she ran her fingers through my hair. "And I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

The cloudfall turned to rain around dusk, and we climbed up and out into clear skies. There was no sign of other Lighters for miles around, only a stunning landscape of pink and red streaks left by the setting sun across the dark blue Heavens. The charts claimed we were somewhere over west Europa; the Charioteer, shining in the northwest, would swing low across the northern horizon as the night went on before ascending slightly in the northeast sky before dawn.

We anchored within sight of pale mountains that rose majestically up to us as if the ground itself wanted to be closer to the stars. Up on deck I soaked strips of linen in water mixed with limbit oil and, leaning over the side of the ship, smoothed them over the delicate patchwork of new wood that was growing across the stern.

The cannonball had only clipped us and the damage was less than I had feared, nothing that wouldn't heal with time and care. The ship's pulse occasionally skipped and trembled, and looking

down at the ground I felt uneasy too. I could sense the weight of the anchor that held us steady, resting on the rocks below, holding us back. Children on the workshop told stories about tribes of Grounders swarming over a ship's anchor, pulling it down to its death. They made up ghoulish tales about what Gounders did to the Lighters on the ships they caught. Only foolish stories.

I wanted to get back above the clouds.

When I was done I sat to watch Auriga move across the northern sky. Polaris was there, as always, a lynchpin around which all else seemed to turn, and our sails were filling up with light. The Pale Man was waning in the southeast. Wisps of cloud still clung to the surface of the deck and the night was damp and cold. My knee was still in pain as I wrapped myself in an old blanket, one Adia had woven years before. She had made all my clothes – every stitch of me had passed through her hands – and I could still recall the night we stood on deck and burnt my grey workshop rags with childlike joy, believing it would somehow ward off old ghosts. She was probably down in her workshop now, spinning and weaving the new cotton.

It was in that room that I first met her. For seven years she trained as a weaver on the bridalship before being chosen for marriage. Six of us grafted for weeks to make the loom and jenny that she would use to make clothes for her new family; long days and nights spent in the cramped dark of our workshop as we toiled, knowing that she and her kind were fed and warm and pampered. I used to think her memories of the fleet must be so different to mine – no fighting for crumbs of food or respect, nobody treating her like a coil in a machine. I took years to learn just how wrong I was.

It was by chance that a shipfitter fell ill and I was sent to help the crew making repairs to her new ship. Adia was brought on board one night by her aunt, who seemed to disapprove of her seeing the ship before her wedding day. We were told to line up silently on deck and keep our heads bowed as she came aboard, unworthy as we were of being near someone chosen for better things. I watched the hem of her long white dress as she passed by, her aunt following close behind and cursing nonexistent specks of dirt.

The next night they returned unexpectedly. Adia sent her aunt to view the galley and caught me alone in the workshop. As soon as I saw her I knew why she had been chosen. She was beautiful – pale green eyes and hair as dark as midnight. She radiated an innocence and grace that disarmed everyone she met. But behind her outward appearances of piety, there was a much deeper soul within, one that was troubled and uneasy with her fate. She confessed to me that she felt sold, cheaply bargained for by others. I was alarmed by her openness, not knowing she had watched me from her perch on the bridalship, that she had recognised a lonely kindred spirit.

We spoke again many times, whenever she could sneak away and I could pretend I had this job to do, or that job to do. The night before her wedding I went to stock the workshop with the last of the silk gifted by the Aurigan elders and she met me there. I told her that I was stealing away, more out of kindness than expectation – I was taking her wedding gifts after all. To my amazement she kissed me, and swore that she would tell the elders if I did not take her with me.

A week later we were so tangled up in each other, we almost drifted across the equator.

As the first rays of dawn began to colour the sky, Adia emerged on deck and sat beside me. The scent of limbit oil was still on my hands. We watched together as the eastern clouds turned pink and cast their light onto the mountains.

"How is the hull?" she asked after a long silence.

"Healing well. We should be able to sail soon."

"Damn the Taurans to the Scorpion," Adia muttered, "and damn their ship too." I was sure she didn't really mean it.

"Do you remember the night we left?" I asked. "I promised you we'd never go hungry, and we'd never have to fight other people's wars. So many things..." I turned to look at her. "You made me feel invincible that night. I promised you we'd be free of them, and we will be. Starting from now."

She slipped her arm around me and I wrapped the blanket over us both. In my mind I plotted a course southwest to where some friendly twinships might be in summertime. The morning air brightened everything it touched, illuminating the snowcaps and rivers and valleys of yellow flowers. We could sail low and keep out of sight, leaving the Aurigan and Tauran fleets far behind us, this time for good.

I was about to kiss her when I heard a scratching noise from the cabin. We turned to see the hen wandering out onto the deck, puffing up its feathers, squawking into the lightening sky.

"I've decided I like it," Adia said with a laugh. "It's strangely lovable."

I looked up at our sails. They were brimming with light, waiting to pull us away.

It had been a long time since we had sailed so low in the summer. I had forgotten how warm the air could be. Our sails had filled with light all night long and were taking us south at good speed through the morning. I felt the way I had done all those years ago, the day I first took the wheel in my hands and steered us from our past.

Adia stood at the stern, keeping an eye on the bindings that covered the healing wood, making sure we weren't pushing the ship too hard too soon. She was wearing a blue dress, one the colour of an afternoon sky; she seemed truly happy for the first time in a long while. I unfastened the top button of my shirt and the air flowed in like warm water around my chest, rushing over my skin, pouring out through the cuffs of my sleeves. Below us was a beautiful blanket of dark forest, interspersed with little clearings of pale green. For such a savage place, the ground had its own strange beauty, though nothing to match the majesty of the Heavens.

Near midday we passed beneath a heavy bank of cloud that blocked out the sun, leaving a chill breeze to run across the deck. I gripped the wheel tightly. Something was wrong. Behind us, the white clouds above were marked with a smudge of grey. It grew darker and darker until the bow of a ship broke through, the same bronze bull bearing down on us, picking up speed, sails every bit as bright as our own.

"No!" I shouted. It wasn't possible, it wasn't real. We'd come too far for this to happen. They had the advantage of speed and height and as the clouds broke above us, there was nowhere left

to hide. I was so stupid, so rash to take us south, knowing they were near...

I listened for the sound of guns but there was nothing. As Adia followed my gaze to see the ship I looked at her, her blue dress dancing in the wake of the sails. I'd always known I'd fail her in the end. She turned back to me, tears in her eyes.

"They're hoisting up boarding ropes!" she shouted across the deck, her voice almost lost in the winds. She was right. The bullship was running on our port side – soon they would be alongside us.

Boarded by Taurans. I couldn't even contemplate it – we were better off dead. I did the only thing I could. I pulled hard on the sailarm, spun to starboard and as the mainsail sagged we plunged towards the earth, down and down, closer to the trees, closer to the unknown. I would crash us into the very ground before becoming their prize.

Adia skidded up beside me, facing the stern, watching the bullship follow our descent. Her face was etched with fear. I didn't need to ask if they were still gaining.

"Adia, do you trust me?" I whispered, looking up to the endless expanse of blue above, wondering what was truly there behind the daylight.

"I trust you."

I closed my eyes. "Mighty Polaris, we pray for you to guide us now..."

The ship lurched suddenly, wind catching the mainsail and levelling us off with such speed that I felt the jarring shock right up through my knee. I heard Adia's sharp intake of breath, felt my hand move the wheel, and finally I opened my eyes. We were so close to the ground now that I could see birds flying up from the tops of trees, smoke rising from a nearby clearing. From behind I heard cannons run out at last – at least death was better than capture – and then another sound, a *thud*, but louder than any I had ever heard before, louder than cannonfire, louder than any arrow I had heard as a child as I sat in the darkness. There were shouts from the ship behind, and then another *thud*, louder still, but it too was behind us, behind and below.

"The Scorpion himself," Adia gasped, her voice trembling, and she turned her head to the skies, tears running down her cheeks. I threw the wheel again and veered starboard, our sails at full pelt. The damaged stern was groaning and we could not climb back up. Adia was praying under her breath. I realised the sound of the other ship had ceased. I turned around.

In our wake, the bullship had stopped strangely in mid flight, as if they had dropped anchor. The crew on deck were running to and fro helplessly. As we pulled further away I could see two great arrows, each the size of a cannon, stuck in its belly; from each arrow a long rope trailed down to a clearing in the forest.

The Taurans quickly lowered a man over the side, armed with a sword to hack themselves free, but a volley of small arrows from below riddled his body, leaving him swinging to and fro like a puppet. As we finally started a slow climb the bullship began to fall to the clearing below, where two sickening contraptions of giant metal wheels within wheels were turning, pulling the ropes down, pulling the ship down, splitting it apart, the crack of its failing body echoing through the sky, the screams of its crew lost in the air. As the clearing passed out of sight, I caught a glimpse of Grounders swarming over the wreckage, picking it clean.

Adia sobbed into my chest and we collapsed to the deck, and as I wrapped my arms around her she shook, shook and shook.

Months later, in uncharted southern skies, we worshipped all the Heavens and let fate set our course. Land was rare and we could sail for weeks over vast oceans, lost in blue above and below. The water would sometimes rage, great waves reaching up like mountains; sometimes it would sit as still as glass. I would stand on deck to watch it for hours. They say we came from the sea once.

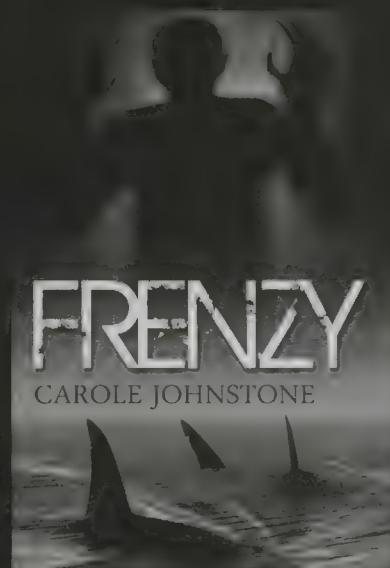
When over land we saw small fleets flocking together, ships bearing crosses and horned horses as figureheads. Some day we might sail with them awhile. For now we were content to drift alone.

One night, as we skimmed low over a wide lake, hauling up fresh water, we caught a silvery bird in our bucket. It had slippery skin instead of feathers and small wings that flapped in water as if in the air.

We threw it back over the side and watched it fly away, into the deep.

R.J Payne is a fantasy fiction author from Cambridge, a city that remains a constant inspiration to her. When not writing she can usually be found at the theatre, the pub, or travelling around Europe. 'By Starlight' is her first published work in the UK. Visit her online at differentstar.net.

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ILLUSTRATED BY MARK PEXTON

COLIN HARVEY

THE KILLING

THE STREETS

The earth is rich in textures and smells. It hurtles by, your clawed hands scrabbling at earth, stones and tree roots, your prey's odours hooked into your nostrils, pulling you along with fragrant fingers of meat and blood and ordure. Upwards you go and the too-bright sky burns your eyes and your victims' screams scour your eardrums, but it doesn't matter, for your killing bite crunches bone and the hot sweet taste of blood fills your mouth. You spit out the foul cotton and polyester wrapping and as your grasping bite clamps onto the corpse so that you can pull your victim into the hole you erupted from, its head lolls over and you know with a shock of recognition who it belongs to –

The phone ringing woke Thom. He scrabbled for it down the side of the chair. "Yeah?"

"You napping?" Marian's cool tones were blurred by a lousy line, but he could still hear the reproach beneath her amusement.

"Nah, just letting the cat out." He rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, squinting. The watery spring sunshine streamed through the window. At least it would charge the roof panels a little, and anything that cut their power bills to the merely astronomical helped.

Lately he *had* been falling asleep in the daytime, but there was little else to do but watch Sky's latest feel-good pap or be lectured by the Beeb on street-safety, and at least the TV hibernated if he stayed still too long.

"You checked first?"

"Nah, I put him out to face the first passing Snark." It came out sharper than he'd meant. "Joking. Course I did, love."

His unexpected half-apology seemed to catch her off guard, for she fell silent. He flicked the deep-screen on for the dog-racing – he'd put a couple of quid on a hound running at Hammersmith – but instead found himself watching a bulletin on a Bubo outbreak in Ghent. He'd never liked Belgians, they were too boring, but he wouldn't wish the plague on anyone. "You still there?" he said at last.

"Yeah, sorry," she said with a sudden catch of breath that made him wonder if she'd been crying. "You at home?"

"What have you forgotten?" He tried to sound amused, but it came out querulous. "I was on my way to sign on."

"I forgot your Auntie's prescription. Could you drop it in at the pharmacy?"

He checked the time. "I have to sign on first."

"Okay," she said.

He accessed Auntie's pension file, printed off the prescription, and gathered the ID needed to prove he was the old woman's proxy.

And afterwards he would take his chances and sneak over for a couple of hours with Liv.

He pulled the front door closed behind him.

The air smelled of dust and neglect, the East wind whipping bits of paper into the air. Turning his collar up he stared at St. Mary Redcliffe, its spire now dwarfed by the ultra-highs soaring from their islands on the nearby river. The windmills that had given the hill its name were back, now with giant blades shaped like hundred-foot-high Spitfire propellers. He listened for a minute then, satisfied, set off alongside Victoria Park, whose grounds were scarred with Snarkhills, passing the burned out wreck of an old petrol-engined Skoda.

YouGov's SnarkWatch site showed the locations of each Snark attack. Theory was that they returned to the scenes of their previous kills, and that people who travelled by the same route all the time were more likely to be attacked. But no one knew for sure, even now, a decade after Animal Lib warriors mistakenly let them out of Orton Industries' bio-research labs, instead of the mink and chinchillas they'd targeted. That the liberators had signed their own death warrants had been scant consolation to the thousands of victims since.

Thom walked quickly, humming some thrash-metal to set a

pace, keeping close to the terraced houses, and skipping across the road as he reached the lamppost which had never worked as far as he could remember, but was a useful landmark and impromptu gallows when necessary. He passed another Snarkhill, the soft new asphalt forming a miniature volcano cone. Another lesson learned the hard way – pedestrians should avoid new tarmac, which was fractionally softer than older road surfaces.

Crossing into the next street he heard a rumbling, and held his breath. Rumour was that Snarks weren't the worst bio-weapon to have escaped the labs, that there were things that would eat their victim's brains and leave them superficially unharmed and ready to be used as a zombie against the Asiatics, others that would paralyse and use their prey as a live host for their offspring. Thom guessed that that was just bollocks fed to the plebs by *The Daily Mail* and its sister rags.

The Snarks were bad enough and unlike the urban myths were actually out there. They had the digging ability of a mole crossed with super-fast reflexes and a rapacious appetite. That was bad enough. Thom wondered what maniac would design an animal that could also out-breed rabbits and survive where cockroaches couldn't.

"The Old Cold War made people do some bad things," Marian had said in her dogmatic way when he'd voiced such a question. "And the war's worse this time round." He wondered how she knew.

He saw a dog ahead and froze. Feral or domestic, he wondered, and was answered when it scratched at a door. When there was no answer, the mangy poodle barked. Thom tiptoed even more lightly, while trying to speed up as well. He reached the next corner just as he heard the rumbling, saw the slight pressure wave pushing up the tarmac, and just as the door to the house opened, and the old woman reached out to drag it in, the paving slabs mushroomed upwards, and something shaped like a mole – but whose head was as big as the old woman – exploded out of the ground, taking them both in one bite of more and bigger teeth than any animal had a right to have.

While it was busy dragging its prey back down into the hole, he was off and running to Auntie Beth's house. His head was splitting, and he felt as if he would be sick at any minute.

"It was almost on the front doorstep," he called to Auntie Beth, pouring boiling water into the kettle. "Never seen one so close to a house. They don't like the concrete." No one knew if that was true. Orton's prompt arrest and suspiciously speedy suicide, and the lynch mob that had stormed Orton Industry's labs meant that people didn't know as much as they should about them. Some such as Thom's mates down the pub said that that was deliberate.

Up in her bedroom he gently pulled the old woman's skinny legs out of bed. She groaned, and noticing the bed sores he resolved to move her more often. "The shakes are bad today," he said, referring to the palsy that made her limbs quiver. On her few good days, Beth Hyde was still the same woman who had raised him after her staunchly Christian sister and brother-in-law had been shipped off to a camp. Luckily, their teenage son had already started to behave in ways that made it obvious that he didn't share their unfashionable – and by the end of the Jihad increasingly provocative – views, so he escaped their fate.

Today was like most days, though, with Beth no longer able to remember who she was, who he was, and worst of all, where the toilet was. Sniffing, he winced, and chattered as he guided her to the bathroom. "It's the people who keep to routine who seem to get caught by the Snarks." Looking away as he lifted her nightie to nominally preserve her dignity, he sat her on the lavatory.

"Marian's got a promotion," he said, realising that today was a bad day – Beth could barely stand – and breaking off some of the cheap toilet paper. "We can eat meat *four* times a week." And spoon-feed Auntie the left-overs the next day, as he would today, after washing and dressing her. Once, the government had paid carers an allowance, before the pensioners' numbers exploded and those of the carers dwindled. "I don't know what her job involves," he added. He had stopped asking; something clerical at the Department of Work and Pensions. It had needed a first-class Honours degree to get it, and he was grateful they were so lucky, if tired of feeling so useless. She often told him he shouldn't resent the Official Secrets Act precluding her discussing it with him – that it kept him safe from the hardened criminals looking for information from partners such as him. "A shame Marian's such a stickler for the rules," he thought aloud as he turned Auntie around. "It'd be nice to have some bloody idea of what she does."

He pushed through the job centre doors with a minute to spare for his interview – being late would have cost him a week's money – then had to wait forty minutes to see his Benefit Provider. It gave him time to get his breath back. The pink and turquoise chairs had been gaudy when they were installed two years earlier, but now were as drab as before the last overhaul.

From the job centre he took the new raised walkways across to the pharmacist, where he dropped in the prescription, proved that he was her proxy and signed that he would pick up the medicine the next day. All of which could have been done electronically, he thought sourly, but it filled up the day. But he had the rest of it to himself. He hummed a jazz revival of 'Every Time You Say Goodbye'.

Liv opened the door with a smile. "You took your time."

He kissed her. "I had to take a detour."

As they fell into bed, Thom told her about Auntie, and Liv's face clouded. "If you moved in with me –" He hushed her with a finger to her lips. It was an old discussion. Liv's parents had had to use every trick in the book to reduce the inheritance tax on the sixth-floor flat, but still, although it was all she would ever have, there wasn't room for her, two boys and Thom and Auntie.

They spent the next two hours in bed, though as the afternoon wore on and they dressed Liv slowly grew ever more tense, as she did every afternoon he'd spent with her; the school her sons attended took every precaution possible, using Thumpers to simulate footsteps, but though attacks on buses were rare, they still happened from time to time – some of the Snarks seemed to be able to recognise the decoys as fakes.

When the boys burst through the door Liv's relief was as palpable as always. Thomas the younger son gave Thom a toothy grin, but Dan only grunted, doggedly showing no sign of friendliness, even after a year.

"I'll be going," Thom said. She begged him to stay, but he

shook his head. "I need to get home. Good little man must have the dinner waiting."

Rush hour usually brought with it increased Snark attacks though today's trip home was uneventful. Thom noticed more people wearing respirators than usual, despite the air quality being much better than in summer. He asked Marian about it when she came through the door, pulling her own mask off.

"Been an outbreak of Blacktongue," she said.

While she ran a bath – she would soak in the water as if to wash away the stains of the day – he cooked vegetables to stretch the lasagne further. "Good day?" he asked when she emerged from the bathroom, hair turbaned up with a towel, dressing-gown half undone, though it didn't arouse him. He had to think of Liv on the few occasions when he and Marian made love.

She didn't answer, but retreated to the bedroom to dress.

He shrugged. "I guess not, then."

They ate dinner in front of the television, Marian forking lasagne into her mouth like a machine.

Another evening passed almost silently with a woman he didn't love but couldn't leave, barely four miles away from the woman he loved but couldn't afford to be with.

He went to bed too early, pleading a headache. It wasn't completely a lie; his limbs were aching.

The prey are getting harder to catch; they wrap themselves in fast-moving metal boxes that taste foul and are often too quick to trap. Yesterday you caught two at once, an old one with a small furry thing that was barely a bite on its own but served as an appetizer for the main meal. Even had you been already full – rather than starving – it would have only satisfied you for a few days, though they are better than the morsels that flock through the spaces below. But you need to feed again, and soon.

Dinner is moving around up there, you can sense them, share their feelings sometimes, smell their fear as they go about their lives.

"Have you got any cash?" Thom asked. He could have stayed in bed, but sharing breakfast gave him company, and he sensed that Marian liked it.

"Again?" Marian asked, though he sensed she secretly liked him asking. It gave her power.

"I lost a bit on a dog yesterday."

"Oh, Thom, you're not turning into a gambling addict?"

He shrugged. He had actually given the money to Liv, who didn't have enough to live on. He was finding it hard to think this morning so instead of replying, he just stared at her over the cereal.

She gave him a fifty. "I should transfer it to your card."

"A lot of places don't like taking cards," he said.

"Leaves too many traces," she said with a nasty smile.

"Not like they can't tell where we are by tracking our phones, anyway." They were the government, police, anyone in authority who formed an amorphous, resented mass in Thom's mind.

He studied Marian, tried to see her as she had been when he'd met her at Uni; before he'd got such a crap grade that he was unemployable and the laughter and sex had soured. Ten years on she had barely changed physically, though she dressed better and styled her hair regularly. The only *real* difference, he decided,

was the permanent downturn in the corners of her mouth.

"What?" She had looked up and caught him gazing at her.

"Nothing much," he said.

She didn't pursue it. Once she would have. Instead, she asked, "When are you going to see Auntie?"

Before he could answer his mobi warbled. He stared at the caller-avatar in surprise before answering. "Amir," he said to the cartoon Bollywood idol. "How you doing?"

"Good, mate. Long time, eh?" Before Thom could reply, Amir added, voice so loud that Marian could probably hear every word, "I got a bit of a problem, and wondered if you could help me."

"Long as it's legit," Thom said, aware of Marian's gaze. He grinned at her, and she raised her eyebrows with a smile.

"Course it is, man. I ain't gonna offer you no black, not with that Gauleiter missus of yours."

Thom mouthed *sorry* at Marian and said, "She's only civil service, mate."

"Might as well be the fucking Stasi, pal. They all the same, all talk-talk-talking to one another trying to drive us on-tre-pren-oors out of business. Listen, I got a man had an accident overnight, left me shorthanded. I'm doing the full eco-refit on an old terraced place in Bishopston. It's only one day's work, if my man turns back in tomorrow."

You mean, if you can get someone else to work on the black, Thom thought. Cash in hand would never be driven out, not while men like Amir were around, despite all the government's efforts, which had led some to complain that penalties for untaxed income were almost as bad as for murder. "You'll need to make it worth my while," Thom said. "They'll dock me a day's pay, plus I need to arrange a sitter for Auntie, and there's the cost of getting there."

"Yeah, yeah," Amir said. "I'll cover your dole plus a tenner plus the cost of the fare. Get the Bedminster mono across to Zetland Road and we'll pick you up." The line went dead.

Marian smiled. "Looks like your day's taken care of."

He felt absurdly cheerful. "Looks like it is."

It felt odd walking with Marian to the monorail station, changing his normal semi-random shuffle to her more ordinary pace. But while her walk was regular, she always thoroughly checked the route so that they avoided previous kill-sites.

She and most of the rest of the crowded compartment left when they reached the city centre. "I'm working late tonight." She gave him a farewell peck.

He had bought a ten-journey card – it was only marginally more expensive than a return. "Just in case Amir's man doesn't turn up tomorrow," he had explained to an amused Marian. With it burning a hole in his pocket, he toyed with the idea of sneaking off to meet Liv, or even riding the mono out to journey's end at Filton for the sheer fun of it, but he squashed both ideas.

But as soon as he was alone he rang Liv, sans avatar.

She also answered bareface. "You're up early." She smiled.

"I couldn't wait to see you."

"Flannel merchant," she said, her colour rising, but she could only half-hide her pleasure.

"I've got a job." He pulled an apologetic face. "Sorry." He added, "It's only for today, I think."

She said, "I can't expect you to turn down work to see me. But if you keep doing it..." She raised an eyebrow in mock threat. "What about Auntie Beth? Will Marian take care of her?"

Will she bollocks, Thom thought. "No, she's tied up. I'll go across at lunchtime."

"Why don't I visit her?" Liv said.

"You sure? I don't want to put you to any trouble..." It was an unexpected relief. He'd half-expected to not be able to call in on Auntie at all.

"I wouldn't offer if it was any trouble," Liv said with a smile. "Where did you say you kept the key?"

"Third brick below the doorbell," he said. "You're an angel."

When he descended the steps of the Zetland Road terminus Amir was waiting for him with four other men, two of them in the cab of a flatbed, two more sitting in the back. Amir clapped him on the shoulder in greeting. The others nodded, but didn't speak. They barely talked all day, except to ask for tools or help as they fitted the sleek black panels. Thom guessed that Amir had warned them that he was married to a civil servant and therefore suspect.

The redbrick house was merely one in countless rows of bay-windowed Edwardian terraces with stained glass over the front door, whose ground floor was now uninhabitable without Snark-proofing.

Amir's men had already covered the entire ground floor with a concrete-floored recycling tank into which flowed the run-off from dishwashers, washing machines, baths and showers while the water doubled as Snark-proofing. The conversion required the lounge to be moved up a floor and the bedrooms to the attic. Inevitably some space was lost, but it saved lives.

"What you going to do with the tiles?" Thom asked Amir in the afternoon, as they stacked them in the flatbed while the others clamped the solar panels to roof joists in their place.

"Sell 'em," Amir said. "It's added profit. You interested?"

"Nah, thanks," Thom said. "We're panelled up with solars."

As Thom finished stacking the tiles, Amir hefted the turbine, a compact version of those covering Windmill Hill. "We'll fit this and we're done. We made better time than I expected. Fancy a pint?"

Thom weighed up how long it would take to get to Liv's. "Not just yet," he said. "I have something to do first." He gave Amir a little wink.

Amir grinned back. "That's more like my old schoolmate." He clapped Thom on the shoulder. "I was beginning to worry that Marian was turning you into a saint."

The boys were at late class as usual on Tuesdays so Thom was able to snatch an hour with Liv. But too soon she was kissing him goodbye, fastening a shirt button that he had missed. "You ought to get Auntie to the doctor's. She didn't look too good."

"Tomorrow," he promised. As they kissed again, he groaned. "Oh can't I stay," he sang falsetto, "just a little bit longer?"

"You promised to meet Amir and the boys," she said. "Go!"

Riding back on the mono, Thom saw Marian. He was about to call out to her, but she looked so furtive that when she changed lines he decided to follow her instead. She was dressed in a scruffy jacket without the pashmina he had bought her for her

last birthday, minus the make-up she normally needed to face the world, and wearing a pair of thick-rimmed glasses – as a disguise, maybe.

She walked briskly to a large Georgian building facing an open square paved with flagstones, emerging an hour later in her usual clothes. He tailed her until he was sure that she was going home. Only then did he resume his journey.

Next day was back to normal, though it was hard to adjust after a day of having some purpose, of *making* something. In fact, having worked even for one day made it harder to cope with his usual lack of a central purpose.

"Did you have a good night?" Marian seemed to crunch her cereal with extra ferocity, but it was probably his hangover making it sound so loud.

"Yep," he said, and to forestall any complaints she may have made about drinking his earnings away added, "Amir was buying."

"That was good of him."

"Probably charity for old time's sake," Thom said, screwing up his eyes at the hit of extra strong coffee. "But I don't mind long as he don't rub it in. He said something about getting a bonus for finishing early, but I think that's crap."

"What about your Aunt?" Marian said.

"Looked in on the way to the pub," he lied fluently, though she had asked the question a little *too* casually. Does she suspect? he wondered. "That's why I met him after work. I didn't think I could leave her all day." He put a little emphasis on the 'all' and was gratified to see her flush.

"What plans today?" he said. "Want to meet for lunch?" He didn't really want to meet, but Amir had suggested it, when they had talked about it the night before, after – Thom realised now – one beer too many. "Try something unexpected," Amir had said. "Watch her reaction."

Marian looked nonplussed. "I – no, I can't. Sorry, I have to work through lunch. Sorry. What will you do instead?"

"I'll check the website for jobs," he said. "Fetch Auntie's prescription – I didn't get a chance yesterday – and get her shopping. The usual."

He sighed, and she reached across and squeezed his hand. "If we could get her in a home..." she said, but they both knew that there were too few places that would take a semi-continent woman who on good days could just remember who she was.

"It's okay," he said, knowing that she didn't cope well with illness. Marian's limit was to share Saturday afternoon visits with him, and they were the shortest of the week.

She squeezed his hand. "Thanks."

"What for?"

"Understanding."

He smiled, obscurely disappointed that she had turned down the lunch offer, even though he'd expected her to.

Later he surfed the net, while the TV showed a programme on the slow death of the cattle industry from increasing costs and dwindling profit, multiple disease outbreaks, and finally rural Snarks. The narrator said, "An upside of the mass move from dairy to cereal is that as crops don't attract Snarks, the farmers are safe if they take sensible precautions." Thom thought of the downside: increasingly starving Snarks moving into the cities.

When he checked the jobsite, predictably most vacancies called for PhDs. He toyed with the idea of returning to Uni, but with Marian earning they'd have to fund it themselves, and that would tip them over the edge of solvency. With a sigh, he exited the jobsite and checked SnarkWatch, noting recent kill sites.

Marian had urged him to spend longer with Auntie, prompted, he guessed, by her own guilt, so he left earlier than usual. He took the street parallel to the route he'd taken before, so that the Snark wouldn't sense a pattern. Several times he found himself walking a straight line and started to hop from crack to crack for a minute or two, humming Bob Marley, ensuring his rhythm was irregular enough to not attract a Snark.

A corpse hung from a lamppost, and he shivered, wondering what urban justice had prompted the hanging; the St. Vitus Dance-like thrashings of Blacktongue seemed to draw Snarks, and flash-mob lynchings grew common as the disease mutated, it seemed, at will. Or it could simply have been that someone accused the man of petty theft. The body seemed to be twitching but it must have been the breeze or his imagination. He walked on, his mood soured.

Auntie seemed worse today, barely responding at all when he tried to ease her out of bed, so he left her where she lay. When he tried to feed her she turned her head away, groaning. He had to get her to the toilet, however much pain it caused her. It was then that he noticed the bruising on her legs, and felt her forehead. "You're burning up, Auntie."

He called Marian on his mobi for advice, but went straight through to her voicemail so he hung up.

Then he took a bowl of warm soapy water to Auntie while she sat on the throne. He washed her, while trying to screen out her cries. After helping Auntie into a dressing gown, Thom shepherded her into her box-sized lounge where he sat her in a chair, while he rushed over to the pharmacy. He hoped that he might be able to log on to a public terminal there and check Auntie's symptoms.

But the terminal returned a dozen answers and the pharmacist seemed unsure, asking him a barrage of whispered questions to which he didn't have the answers, while she looked around as if a flash-mob might coalesce at any moment.

Heading back, he wondered whether to call Liv, but decided instead to send her a text: CAN'T MAKE IT TODAY. SORRY. She might feel as let down as he did, but if Auntie had something serious he couldn't risk exposing her to it.

Back at Monmouth Street, Auntie felt even hotter. Worried about dehydration, he mixed boiling water from the kettle with honey and lemon, then with some cold water to make it drinkable. But she seemed even more desperate not to eat or drink, and as she wriggled and squirmed to avoid the cup he saw her tongue and went cold.

He couldn't believe that he hadn't noticed it before.

Auntie Beth retracted the black lump as if suddenly lucid; it may have been his imagination, but he thought he saw momentary fear in her eyes and wondered if she knew deep down how deadly her symptoms were.

He skulked around the library, looking for internal surveillance cameras, waiting for a careless user to leave their desk with the machine still logged on to the net. Eventually he found one, and

googled vague terms like 'swollen tongue'. Apart from the obvious one he found no mention of other infections. He managed reach a free Australian site via a couple of detours and typed in 'Blacktongue,' but the machine immediately locked down. He shook his head in frustration and walked away as library security sauntered in, their casual behaviour not fooling him for a second.

On the way back he felt a distant rumbling several times, and changed his rhythm and direction to create an illusion of randomness. He heard a scream, quickly cut off, from a couple of streets away. He could feel them, something he'd never noticed before. And when he reached home and poured himself a glass of water, the surface of it shook as if there were a distant earthquake. He poked his tongue out in the mirror. Was it his imagination, or was it slightly swollen?

He was racking his brains wondering where he could get answers when his mobi rang. "Amir," he said, as icon switched to bareface. "I was just about to call you."

"That building you followed your missus to last night," Amir said without preamble. "The one you sent us the pic of."

"Uh-huh." Thom wondered if he might yet regret his drunken confession. "It said Colston Enterprises on the front plate."

"That's bollocks, mate. It's DWP Fraud Surveillance. Told you they was all bloody Stasi. You're married to a snoop." Amir paused. "Course, if I was mixed up in the wrong kind of things, like, I might have a mate who was involved in selling alternative-sourced pharmaceuticals. You know?"

"And might this mate -"

"If I was, which of course I'm not."

"But if you were, would this mate be unemployed?"

"By the law of averages, people like that are."

"So he might recognise someone from the Stasi?"

"Again, by the law of averages..."

"I understand." Thom paused. "Well, could your mate do me a favour? I need a temporary Net-User ID."

Amir's eyes narrowed and Thom wondered how much he should tell his old friend. He had no proof it was Blacktongue (yeah, right, said a cynical inner voice), nor that he was infectious. Amir said, "What do you need it for?"

"A friend of mine is in some trouble. I don't want Marian involved."

"I'll text you the details," Amir said. "You'll have thirty minutes, so use it quick."

"Sure." Thom hung up. Seconds later, his mobi beeped. Crash-and-burns were self-eradicating and in theory left no traces. If he was quick he could search the net, then report his phone missing straight after, denying any knowledge of the search. He headed for the front door. Might as well do it on the move.

For once, he had to consciously remember to change rhythm, and several times he thought he heard a rumble coming nearer. When he finally managed to find what he was looking for, he stopped, and stared at the screen. Blacktongue's symptoms matched Auntie Beth's exactly. The shaking, swollen tongue, joints bruised from internal bleeding.

The virus was usually caused by insect bites, as it was in the original bovine disease that gave the geneticists their template. But then the bastards had made it still more lethal, making it temporarily communicable by touch. Thom was surprised that

the Chinese or Iranians, or whoever was really behind it, had limited the infectious period to only twenty-four hours, but guessed that uncertainty would add to the panic its mere presence would cause.

Worse, symptoms included headaches and nausea. Maybe it wasn't a simple hangover he'd had. In which case, Liv and the boys were as good as dead.

He tossed the mobi into a bin as if it burned his hand. Googling even only a semi-official site with 'Blacktongue' would set off alarms in government surveillance sites and they could use the mobi to track him. He danced his way past the rumblings of the subterranean predators to Auntie Beth's house, humming 'Spy in the House of Love'. He was oddly calm: perhaps the grief and then the anger would come later.

Auntie Beth had fallen out of bed and was lying face down on the carpet. Her breathing was ragged, her eyes sightless when he lifted and turned her, but her feet were beating a manic percussion on the floor, and her hands and arms twitched and flexed to an internal metronome. Her tongue was now so swollen that the black slab of flesh poked out of her mouth, even when he tried to close it.

Thom put her down and walked across to the mantelpiece above a fire that hadn't been lit in decades. He gazed at the pictures: Marian and Thom on their wedding day; Thom aged eleven in his school uniform, grinning toothily at the camera; Auntie Beth in her early forties, holding a young boy by the hand – he stared shyly at the camera, and Thom barely recognised himself; Auntie as a young woman with another woman, who Thom guessed to be her lost love; and a fairly recent one, taken just before the old woman began the slow spiral into premature senility, of Thom flanked by Auntie and Marian. He couldn't remember who had taken any of them.

He walked back to the spasming body, and put his hands on her head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'd end it for you now, but a mercy killing needs to be done right, and I'm not sure I wouldn't stuff it up."

He picked up the antique land phone and dialled Marian's number. Before she could answer, he put down the phone. What was the point of telling her that Auntie had Blacktongue?

"I can't hack this, Auntie," he said from the doorway. "I hope it ends quick, and you don't suffer, love." He pulled the door shut behind him.

He stopped at a little kiosk that sold items whose provenance the buyer didn't ask, and bought a voice-only disposable mobi for which he paid cash. When the elderly Turk asked for ID, Thom said casually, "I've left it at home. I'll bring it in tomorrow." The shopkeeper smiled and added ten pounds to the price, which Thom paid without arguing.

Outside, he dialled Liv and wasn't surprised at her cautious "Hello?" to an unknown voice-only number. "I can't talk for long," he said. "I just called to tell you that I love you, and the boys. I'll call you later. No, nothing's wrong."

He set off for the city centre, singing neo-reggae songs that had a slower beat than normal, weaving across the pavement, at times into the road, wiping his nose occasionally, trying to sort out the confusion of feelings inside him.

When he reached his destination, he called Liv again and said, "I'm going to call you once, then hang up. When I call you

again, straight after, *don't* answer, *don't* speak at all. Just keep quiet." He cut the line, and murmured, "I can't give you hope, darling, I can't give you justice. But I *can* give you revenge." He settled down to wait.

Marian's eyes widened as she saw Thom waiting across the square. He crossed quickly before Marian could descend the steps and joined her at the top, where they would be safe from even the biggest Snark, should one surface.

The square was empty but for a few late commuters, hurrying home before it got dark. Daytime felt safer, whether or not it was. For all their technology, people were still cavemen under the skin, scared of the predators beyond the campfire.

"You knew, didn't you?" he said loudly, phone in hand, his foot tapping in time to the pulsing of the virus through his blood. Somewhere, a Snark was circling, digging its way through the soil.

Marion smiled, and the knowledge in her eyes chilled his blood. "Knew what?"

Thom leaned forward. "Can't hear you," he said, hoping that deafness was a symptom of Blacktongue. Marian repeated the question. "That Auntie Beth had Blacktongue," he replied. "That I'd get it...and..."

"Infect your whore?" Marian shouted, then shrugged. "That's what you get for screwing around."

"She isn't –"

"She might as well be!" Between words, Marian's lips were a line so thin it was nearly invisible. "Why? Wasn't I enough?"

He swallowed, his tongue already feeling too big for his mouth. "Because. There's only so much TV you can watch in a day. Because she doesn't make me feel so bloody useless?"

"It's my fault?" He saw shock turn to anger.

"Not your fault. But you have a job. She doesn't, so it makes us equals."

"And I'm supposed to pay for you and your whore?"

Thom could see now how it might have looked. It was easier for Marian to believe that he paid for sex, than to believe that he was trying to care for a second family. He shook his head. "We'll, we would have taken our chances, if it had come to it. Why are you so bloody angry, anyway? Christ, it's not as if we had anything –"

"I thought we did!" Marian shouted. "I loved you, even when you turned into a whining, walking lump of self-pity."

"You never showed it."

"I never show anything, dummy!" she said, wiping her eye angrily. "Why do you think that I stayed with you? I could live in reasonable comfort on my own, not in a dump like we have."

They stared at one another in silence, and both sighed. Something that should have been so obvious but had got wrapped in the cotton wool in Thom's brain seeped through. "Why haven't you got Blacktongue?"

Marian shrugged. "Luck, I guess." Her smirk told him she lied. "There's a cure."

"No, it's a vaccine," Marian said. "It's nearly impossible to synthesise, so it's rarer than rocking-horse shit. You see why it's kept quiet?"

"So the story's true, then?" Thom nodded, understanding. "Don't want the plebs being cured, do we, draining the state?"

Sometimes I wonder if the bastards let these things out on purpose to keep our numbers down."

"That's just paranoia," Marian said. "Don't be silly."

"Is it? The state's always worked on fear to keep people in line. You need it for your work." Marian's eyes widened as he continued. "If you're buying bootleg meds as part of a sting, you might catch something."

She said, "They're often how it's spread. But how –"

"Your suspects know," he said.

She mouthed an *oh*, and said, "Catch Blacktongue early and you can stop it, though it leaves you needing medication for the rest of your life. I take the pills in work."

His laugh was a bitter snort. "I suppose I've got no chance of getting my hands on any?" He felt the oppressive presence of a Snark rumbling by on the next street.

She looked down, scraped her foot on the step. "I got the vaccine for you," she said. "But only enough for one person. It's up to you if you want it."

"So Liv dies, like Auntie's dying now?"

"Auntie's old!" Marian said, her eyes glinting. "She has no quality of life."

"Did you give it to her on purpose?"

"No! Of course not! What sort of monster –"

"Would infect other people, innocent people? How'd you do it?"

"I didn't," Marian said. "But there are people who will break in for a few hundred quid, while the target's out. Just leave an infected fly buzzing around to spread the virus. Or someone immunised who'll brush up against the target during the infectious window."

"The target? A nice, sterile name for an innocent woman."

"Your whore isn't innocent!"

"Her name," he snarled, gripping her arm, "is Liv. She has a name. She has kids. Is it their fault, too?"

Her eyes widened. "I didn't know – I, I just followed you one day, waited for you to come out, saw her. I didn't know."

"Will you let Liv and her children die?" He dragged her down the steps.

"Stop it!" She tried to reach into her bag, but her right arm was clamped in his hands, and the bag was hanging over her left shoulder so that she couldn't unzip it left-handed. He guessed she was carrying a taser or pepper spray. "Let go of me!"

"Commuters have to cross this." He chin-cocked the cracked paving slabs onto which he'd dragged her, the weak spot in the route to the other side of the square, and the steps up to the monorail stop, and safety. "You're not the only one who can work things out." He stamped his feet, letting the delicious, delicious twitching have its way at last, drumming his heels on the ground right next to a couple of upraised slabs, imitating the symptoms of Blacktongue. "You might be safe from the virus, but you won't survive a Snark attack."

"Thom, please." She tried to wriggle free, but he gripped her left arm in his right hand, to pull her around in a parody of a dance. "Please, Thom, let me go. I'll give you the vaccine. Here," she said, trying to pull free, "let me give it to you now."

But he held on tight. "Come on, Marian, let's dance!" He began to jump up and down on the spot. "Let's pogo!" All his life he seemed to have been scared, or miserable, or both. Knowing

it couldn't get any worse was weirdly liberating. "White riot! White riot! White, white, white, white riot!" He yelled at the top of his voice, trying to remember the lines to some of Auntie Beth's obscure tastes in music.

"Thom, for God's sake!" Her shriek almost drowned out the distant rumbling.

"No more heroes any more!" he bellowed. "Dah-dah-DAH-dah-DAH-dah-dah –"

"Thom!"

He paused, panting. He could hear the rumbling. "What's it going to be, Marian? You want to die as well?" He still hadn't let go of her.

"I can give you the vaccine."

"What about Liv? The boys? An eight-year-old and a teenager – do they deserve to die because their mum met the wrong bloke?"

"I can only get one dose at the moment," she gabbled. "I can get another tomorrow, maybe one the day after that, but I can't get more than three –"

"Do – they – deserve – to – die?" He shouted the words, and she shook her head as the rumbling grew louder. His head was splitting and he was freaking out; he thought it had gone dark for a moment, and that his paws – hands – had gripped stones.

"No. No. I thought –" She shook her head, as if as confused as him. "I didn't know about them. Of course they don't."

"Then get them the vaccine!" Thom begged. "Give Liv one dose tonight."

"But what about you?"

"I'm a dead man anyway, aren't I?" Thom said, knowing that it was true. What was there to look forward to? Empty days of watching TV and screwing a woman he didn't love, or living in poverty with the one he did. "They just haven't turned off my heart yet," he said. "Do you promise, Marian? Promise to get them the vaccine? To take care of them?"

Marian nodded, as the rumbling grew louder –

You're scrabbling at the stones, the scent of the prey nearly enough to make you swoon, but there are rocks in the way. If you can just get through...

"Run, Marian!" he shouted, jumping away from her. "Tip-toe, but tip-toe bloody quick, woman! Run for your life! And look after them!"

He pogoed, shouting and singing in a circle around another pushed up slab. He risked a look, and Marian was half-running, half-skipping in an erratic dance up the steps. He shouted, "Marian! Blacktongue attracts them!"

"What?"

"I can share their thoughts!" He saw her mouth hang open. "I can sense another one!"

He took the phone from his pocket, whispered, "Bye, love."

He could smell wet fur and earth and carrion. He started to sing 'Redemption Song' as the slabs in front of him erupted.

Colin Harvey has had a busy 2009. His novel *Winter Song* is out now from Angry Robot Books, the anthology he edited – *Future Bristol* – and his debut collection *Displacement* have also recently been published. His website is at colinharvey.wordpress.com.

FUNNY PAGES

LAVIE TIDHAR

1 **Midnight. An empty rooftop over Tel Aviv. Lights** winking from the seafront promenade. The air warm, scented. Solar panels like dark mirrors facing the night. A tenant's abandoned barbeque pit, two folding beach chairs, a cigarette stub. He picks it up, smells it, a moue of distaste. Fresh, only recently extinguished. He wears the goggles, starlight turns everything into unreal day. Scans the roof. A figure glides down through the air, silently, behind him, and he turns.

"You," he says. Even with the goggles he can hardly see him. Chameleon blends so well with his environment.

"Me," Chameleon says.

For a moment they regard each other in silence. He feels excitement building, some apprehension. His muscles tense. "Let's do it," he says.

"It's your funeral, Scorpion," the other says. Scorpion can feel his body changing, and he hisses, an inhuman sound, and his hands are claws, and he attacks.

The Sabra rarely goes out at night any more. He is a heavy-set man, not unsuccessful: the offices of his construction company overlook the Mediterranean through tall glass windows, and inside the decoration is all wood and chrome, a mix of old and new. The Sabra wears a chequered shirt and jeans and he smokes Marlboro Lights. He used to work in the cow pens on the kibbutz, working the night shift, and he still misses those days, though he knows you can never go back. He misses the smell of the cows, their complacent sounds as he gave them fresh hay. He misses the hum of the milking machine, the lights in the little room where the kettle was always on, misses the taste of the black coffee and taking a last cigarette before dawn, listening to the kibbutz waking up. He presses a button on his phone, wants to tell his secretary to cancel his next appointment, then realises it's night, there is nobody there. "Getting too old," he says, shaking his head. Then he stands, presses another, hidden, button on the wall.

The wall revolves, revealing a room beyond his office. He steps through the opening and the wall closes shut behind him.

His sanctuary.

Computer screens line the walls. Banks of instruments, lights blinking softly. A digital map of the country dominates one section of wall. Lights flashing, moving, on the map. He tracks them, just the way he used to. Arms shipments, stolen goods, the people trade, the movement of hostile forces, and the...the

others. It used to be he was out every night, as soon as milking was over he'd change, shoot out across the silent fields, over roads where only solitary car lights moved, across the cities and to the borders – wherever there was need. He flexes a muscle and thorns pop out of his skin, all over his body, dark-green and sharp, and he grunts, satisfied, uncoils his fingers, takes a breath, and they disappear. Sabra. He watches the monitors for a long moment. An alarm flashes in the middle of Tel Aviv. One of the banks. He sighs. Once he would have gotten involved, but now... Once he fought worthwhile battles. The Six-Day War, Yom Kippur, he was in the Sinai for days, tracking tanks, attacking when the enemy least expected it... After Lebanon he lost heart. The kibbutz was changing, internal politics were threatening to destroy the movement, and one day he just left, taking Mili and the kids with him. Worked on a building site, progressed to shift manager, later on made a couple of investments, bought a house, started his own company... The kids went to school in the city and didn't seem to mind. Mili got a job in local radio, he liked to listen to her voice, she always played one song for him. Then she died, and he wasn't prepared for that: no terrorist attack, no war, no murder – a traffic accident. A stupid, pointless traffic accident. And now he didn't listen to the radio any more. The kids had grown, left the house. These days he preferred to stay late in the office, dream of one last glorious battle, for Good.

Tank loves the massage parlour in the old bus station. He is not a sophisticate. He sees it in terms of vehicle maintenance: regular oiling, a tightening of screws. Just making sure all systems are go. Though recently he's uncertain. The new Russian girl, Julia: he keeps asking for her, and if truth be known he is no longer that interested in the others. Sometimes they don't even have sex, just talk. He likes her accent, the Russian colouring her halting Hebrew, and he loves her small hands on his back, massaging the thick folds of his skin, and he loves her scent, and the way...

But that's no way to think. And yet, still...he is standing in the vaults of Bank Ha'poalim, loading up the money into bags, and he finds himself missing her.

"Tank?" someone says, and then, "Tank!"

He turns an enormous head and looks down at Eye-Patch. Eye-Patch's single eye stares up at him and it scares Tank. Eye-Patch is a psychopath – certified, sometimes he likes to take out the paperwork and show it around. Tank tries to move away

ILLUSTRATED BY WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE



from the eye but he can't, and he feels himself weakening, his fingers loosening around the money bags... "What the hell's the matter with you?" Eye-Patch says. "Load it up and let's get moving."

"Sure, Eye-Patch, sure," Tank says, eager to please, and he finishes shoving the money into the bags and lifts them up, easily, and they scoot. As they come out he can hear the alarm ringing, Eye-Patch swears, and then there are guards and they have guns and Eye-Patch lifts his patch and in place of an eye there is a stone set there, with a colour like jade, and a sickly green light spreads out across the lobby and Tank hears someone scream. They push forward and there are more guards and then Tank is amongst them and each slap of his hand sends men flying through the air; he can hear a skull cracking every time he hits them. Then they're outside and Speed is waiting for them in the car and they pile inside and Speed hits the gas and the shark-finned machine shoots forward, the acceleration slamming Tank against the seat.

He'd lost Chameleon somewhere over Dizengoff Street. Down below: citizens point, scream. Cameras flash. Scorpion changes, stares down. He is dressed in a black, night-work uniform, ruined now from his change. Where was Chameleon?

They'd fought for a long time. Scorpion's poison, missing Chameleon every time. Chameleon taunted him, scuttling over rooftops, down drains, up sheer walls. Scorpion slower, trailing him, never catching up. Like when he was a kid and they were picking teams: they always picked him next to last, after the fat kid with only four fingers. He'd grown up a quiet, reserved child. Did his army service without distinction, a mechanic in the air force. Was in the wrong place at the wrong time, driving in the desert, on holiday, a blast in the distance, a mushroom cloud rising, knocked over the car, knocked him out. Desert scorpions crawling over him when he woke up. Two weeks later, at home, waking, he staggered into the bathroom, threw water in his face and looked in the mirror and screamed.

Only later did he discover how he could control the transformation. One night he was out late, walking on his own, and saw two men attacking a girl in a dark alleyway. Something inside him crystallized. In the papers the next morning, the bodies of the attackers, bloated by poison, and the girl, talking of a shape that came from the dark and saved her, a shape that might have been insect and might have been man. It was the papers who gave him the name. Scorpion!

But he was that in essence even before.

He scans the rooftops: nothing. Chameleon had disappeared. They went back a long way, ever since the hijacking on Road Six; he had tried to stop them, Chameleon came out of nowhere, slashed him, his tongue darting out, laughing at him. He swore to kill him and so far had failed.

Into scorpion shape again, and he scuttles away, in the dark; back to his lair.

Tank doesn't like it when the Doctor laughs. Deep under the Weizmann Institute, in the Doctor's secret base. Concrete bunker, banks of instruments, chemicals bubbling in glass. The Doctor, hawk-nosed, white hair combed back, a thick German accent he'd never quite lost. An old man, was a child, almost a baby

when the Nazis came to power. "They called me meshugeneh!" the Doctor says. "They called me meshugeneh and said I was a disgrace! Well, I will show them! I will show the world!"

Doctor Meshugeneh pushes a lever on a giant machine and turns. "Show me the money," he says. Eye-Patch motions for Tank. Tank deposits the bags on the long table and the Doctor rubs his hands together, slowly, as if washing them of soap. "Excellent," he says, and Tank's chest swells at the praise.

A small slim figure materialises against the far wall. Chameleon, not bothering to transform, a gorgeous/gruesome creature turning concrete-grey as he steps towards them.

"Any problems?"

Chameleon laughs. "None."

"Good. Very good." The Doctor is happy. "You all did well, children."

Eye-Patch says: "When do we set up?"

"Soon," the Doctor says. "I must order the last parts of the equipment. Then..." and he laughs again, that crazy laugh, and Tank takes an involuntary step back.

2 Ishtar is sitting in Café Joe on Dizengoff Street, drinking a cappuccino, when her phone rings. She picks it up. Scorpion: "That *bastard*." Ishtar rifles the pages of the newspaper on the table in front of her. Front page news: DARING ROBBERY AT BANK HA'POALIM!

She says, calmly, "Who is?" and sips her cappuccino. Scorpion says: "Chameleon. I should have known when he showed up. He distracted me while the others robbed the bank."

Ishtar says, "You know you shouldn't let him rile you."

Scorpion: "And where were *you* last night?"

Ishtar puts down the coffee, checks her nails. "It's not my *job* to fight crime," she says.

"What?"

"It's not like I get *paid* to chase bad guys around, is it? I took a night off."

She had a date. They went to see a movie, had pasta at an Italian restaurant. The guy invited her back to his place for coffee... He was ginger, had dyed his hair black. She thinks, for the hundredth time, that maybe her standards are too high.

"You took a night off."

"You have a problem with that?"

Scorpion sighs the other end of the line. "What are we going to do?" he says. "They're up to something, I can feel it."

"Let me guess," Ishtar says. "You want me to try and find out."

"Something bad is coming, Ishtar. I c -"

"Right, you can feel it." They went out together for a while. It didn't work out. There was still some bitterness left. She sighs too, says, "I'll see what I can do. Meet you at Solomon's place?"

"Right." He sounds relieved.

"Later then." She hangs up.

Powers like trinkets decorating her body... Esther, a quiet girl, unremarkable. Found a necklace in the flea-market in Jaffa, cheap-looking, bargained for it, got it for next to nothing. Something in it called to her, swoops and lines in ancient silver: she put it on and was transformed. Most of the time she is still Esther, and she is still quiet and unremarkable, and as time passes she is more and more reluctant to use the necklace, this talisman of an old goddess who should have been laid to rest in the far

distant past. Nevertheless. She rises, pays, departs. She knows where to go.

The old bus station.

Scorpion is trailing Speed. He won't admit it to anyone, but the truth is he kind of likes her. She is a couple of years younger than him. In the army they served in the same unit, though they never spoke and he doubts she remembers him. He doesn't know what caused her to transform. She has an affinity with cars, becomes one with them, the car an exoskeleton, an extension of her. She's fast, he's not, but at the moment she is stationary, and he watches her from the rooftop. She is sitting in Café Joe, on Dizengoff, drinking a latte, smoking a cigarette, her mechanic's overalls covered in oil patches. She is dark skinned, of Yemenite extraction, petite, doesn't speak much, as far as he knows. Scorpion drops down the side of the building, changes, walks over.

Speed lifts her head, arches an eyebrow, says, "What do you want?"

Scorpion: "Can I sit down?"

Speed: "It's a free country. For some."

Scorpion lets it pass. He sits down. A waiter comes over. Scorpion orders tea. Speed arches an eyebrow again. "What are you, English?" she says. In her lap is a newspaper, on the cover a picture of the heist gang breaking out of the bank, Tank and Eye-Patch, Eye-Patch looking a lot like Moshe Dayan, an image Scorpion knows Eye-Patch tries hard to encourage. He says, "Why did you rob the bank last night?"

Speed says: "Bank?"

Scorpion says: "I know Doctor Meshugeh is planning something."

Speed: "Doctor Meshugeh is *always* planning something."

"So what is he planning now, Speed? What's the big deal? Why the need for cash?"

Speed smiles, and she looks a little dreamy. "Something big," she says. "Something wonderful."

Scorpion says: "The Doctor is crazy."

Speed shrugs. "He has medication. He self-prescribes."

"I want to know what you're up to."

"Get used to disappointment."

His tea arrives. Speed orders a double espresso and a latte chaser. She smiles up at Scorpion. "What are you doing tonight?"

He feels a flutter in his stomach but says, "Guarding the city. Fighting crime."

"You want to go see a movie?"

He is caught unprepared. Speed smiles and lights another cigarette. "There's a late-night *Superman* marathon at the Cinematheque," she says.

Scorpion says, "Are you sure?"

"About what's showing or about going with you?" She waits. "Is that a yes?"

In the army she only went out with officers. He nods, can't help smiling. Her drinks arrive and she drowns the espresso in one shot, and her face is framed by smoke; they grin at each other.

Doctor Meshugeh doesn't like doing the laugh a great deal, but it's expected of him: it's part of the protocol. Most of the lab, too, is only for show: really he does most of his work on a lap-

top these days. At the moment he isn't there, he is above, in one of the boardrooms, having a meeting with the other scientists, some government people. How much he hates them! Politicians. The speaker drones on, a Power Point presentation. Doctor Meshugeh looks at his watch under the table. Tonight, he thinks. Tonight we'll install the equipment, and then...

A small bubble of laughter escapes through his lips and everyone stares.

Julia is different today, but Tank can't quite say how. She is more distant, maybe that's it. She only agrees to a massage and even then her hands on his back are reluctant. Did he do something to offend her? He wonders if he should ask her for a drink after work, then realises he can't: the equipment will be ready tonight and he would have to install it.

As if reading his mind Julia says, "So what are your plans? Do you have anything big planned?"

"Not really," he says.

"But everything about you is so big," Julia says.

The truth is, he is dying to tell her. He's Tank! He robbed the bank last night! And tonight, if all worked well, he would help change the world – "I'm going diving," he tells her.

"At night?" She sounds impressed.

"It's a little job," Tank says, his chest swelling. Julia's hands are a regular beat on his back. "Nothing to it. Just install some specialised equipment, you see."

"What does it do?"

He grins, though she can't see it. "It will make waves," he says. "That sounds nice," Julia says. Tank turns slowly on his back, reaches for her: but she is no longer there.

Solomon² reclines back on the divan and lights the bong, and Scorpion says, "Seriously, man, do you have to do that now?"

"Never a good time," Solomon² says. He is playing The Ramones in the background, 'I Wanna Be Sedated'. "My brain hurts if I think too much. Have to keep it *cool*."

"If you're so smart, can't you figure out what the Doctor is up to?" Scorpion says.

"Not enough *data*, my man," Solomon² says, and the bong bubbles gently as he sucks in more smoke. "What did *you* find out?"

"Nothing," Scorpion says.

"You don't look too bothered," Solomon² says. "Got a hot date, have we?"

Scorpion, startled: "How did you –?"

"Just look at yourself," Solomon² shakes his head. "You're easier to read than a Danny Din book."

"Was Danny Din real, do you think?" Scorpion says, changing the subject. He feels a blush coming on.

"Let me see," Solomon² says. "Little invisible kid, drank purple water invented by a mad scientist – what do *you* think?"

Scorpion had loved the Danny Din books when he was a kid. "It does seem a little far-fetched," he says.

"So Speed asked you out?" Solomon² is tenacious in following a thread of thought.

"What makes you think I didn't ask *her* out?"

"Please," Solomon² says, "Don't insult my intelligence."

Speed had to ditch the car she used the night before but that's OK, there are plenty of other cars around and cars *listen* to her. She finds one she likes just parked there by the roadside, strokes it, and the door opens and the engine purrs and she presses down the accelerator and she's off. She's not too sure about going out with Scorpion. She's not even sure what possessed her to suggest the movies in the first place, not to mention that she might have to sit through *Superman 4*, which is *awful*, but...

She remembers him, though. He was that quiet guy on the unit who always looked at her but never said a word. She wonders if he remembers it. There was something about him even back then, and now...she has to admit the whole scorpion thing is sexy. "My standards are slipping," she tells the car, but the car doesn't answer back.

"You did *what*?" Ishtar says. She's reclining in one of Solomon²'s revolving seats, her long legs stretched out before her. "You should have *arrested* her, not asked her out!"

"I'm not a policeman," Scorpion says, and then he smirks and says, "I took the day off."

"Took the day off."

"Sure."

"Well, *I'm* not so sure about that," Ishtar says. "According to Tank they're doing some kind of underwater work tonight. Something that will *make waves*."

"Literally or figuratively?"

Scorpion turns to Solomon². "Huh?"

Ishtar: "I don't take Tank to be a figurative kind of guy."

Solomon²: "Waves. That could be...interesting."

Scorpion: "We have to stop them."

Solomon²: "Or we could do nothing."

Ishtar snorts. "The dope is messing with your head."

"Au contraire, madam," Solomon² says. "Au contraire."

"What are you talking about?"

"What I'm saying," Solomon² says patiently, "is that it might be more productive – not to mention *interesting* – to let Doctor Meshugheh get on with his installation and see what he intends to do with it."

"Drown us all?"

"I doubt it. Not, at least, without good reason."

"What's a good reason for a madman?"

"He is not mad," Solomon² says reproachfully. "Eccentric."

"If you like him so much why don't you join him?"

"There can be only *one* genius per supersocial unit," Solomon² says. "Otherwise we just don't get along."

"I say we go for them tonight," Ishtar says.

Scorpion says, "I don't think Speed is taking part in whatever is planned tonight. It might be better if I stay close to her, see if I can get any information out of her."

Ishtar snorts. "Right."

Solomon² says, "You could take Orchestra."

"She gives me a headache. She never shuts up."

"And Goliath," Solomon² says.

"Doesn't he go to the same gym as Tank?"

"They're not exactly best friends, if that's what you mean. He should do fine."

"Fine," Ishtar says. She glares at Scorpion. "Enjoy your movie."

"I will."

"Fine."

She storms off. Solomon² shrugs. "Want a hit on this?"

Scorpion: "No thanks. I'll see you later."

When they're gone Solomon² sits quietly for a long time, thinking.

3 Eye-Patch first, sleek in a black diving suit; Tank follows with the heavy equipment; Siberia last, her diving suit as white as her hair. Down and down and down they go, down into the depths of the warm Mediterranean, the moon long lost above. Bubbles rising above Tank's head. Bubbles from further down, from Eye-Patch's fish-like moving figure, bubbles expanding as they rise, up and up and up into the air.

They set up the machinery. A second unit comprising Shell Shock, Shark and Flyer is doing the same work in the depths of the sea beyond Haifa. No talking, hand-movements only. Siberia moving gracefully, the water around her colder than the rest. Faint phosphorescence as Tank moves his arms. Eye-Patch pressing a big red button. The machine comes alive. Numbers scrolling on a small display. Eye-Patch studies them, gives a thumb-up.

They rise.

The moon above, the surface silent. The sea gentle as it rocks – And explodes. Tank thrown on his back, the water hard on impact. Confusion. Opens his eyes, stares.

Ishtar! The bitch-goddess hovering above the water, arms folded on her chest. Her eyes are flame. Eye-Patch rises from the waves, attacks her. They roll and roll and roll in the air. Eye-Patch lands a punch on Ishtar's face. She twists, turns, fights him. Eye-Patch grins. Ishtar backhands him and he arcs through the air, crashes into the water.

Tank stands on the water. The water is cold. The water is ice. Siberia grins at him. She stands on a moving shelf of ice further away, facing –

Facing Orchestra.

Orchestra is music, Orchestra is a weave of notes: Tank can never see her face, her figure, only hear her, like thousands of pirate radio stations clashing with each other. An awful, mournful note shatters ice. Tank loses his footing. From Orchestra: amused notes. Siberia silences the water, the ice rises, an iceberg forming on the quiet Mediterranean sea. Tank lumbers back to his feet –

And is thrown back. He roars. A third time? Above him grins a giant's head. A giant fist comes crashing towards him, as inevitable as a comet. Tank tastes blood and grins.

Goliath. With a roar Tank rises, his hands closing on Goliath's throat. His thumbs find purchase, press: Goliath gurgles, kicks, pain erupting between Tank's legs. He loosens his hold on his enemy's throat. Something comes crashing into Goliath then: Eye-Patch, thrown from on high, rolling on the ice, cursing.

They'd never find the machinery. Already it was dug into the seafloor, deep, and spreading out. All that remains is to have some fun, and he does: he throws himself on top of Goliath, fists go one-two-three on the giant's face, and for a moment it's like no fighting at all: it's like hitting Andre the Giant. Then Goliath grunts and grabs Tank's head in an arm-lock and knees him in

the face. Through bloodied eyes Tank sees Siberia rising high above, on a cliff of ice, sees Eye-Patch going for Orchestra, sees Ishtar diving, and he grins. She is too late, and there is nothing left to find.

"Do you think there can ever be peace?" Speed says.

There's an intermission, half-way through *Superman 2*. They're sitting outside the cinematheque in the warm air and eating ice-cream. "Between us?" Scorpion says. Speed shakes her head. "No," she says. "I mean, in this country."

"I don't know," Scorpion says. Truth is he never was bothered too much about politics. He is vaguely sympathetic to the Palestinians but after all the world is divided into us and them and they are on the other side.

Like Speed.

"I try to deal with simple stuff," he says. "You know. Murder. Robbery. Arson. Kidnapping."

"Didn't you save that kid who was taken last year?" she says. He shrugs, modestly. "Well..." he says.

"That was brave of you."

"It was nothing, really." Then he says, "Why do you have to..." and stops. She grins. "Have to what?" she says.

"Be a criminal?"

"Do you think I'm a criminal?"

"Speed, you helped rob a bank last night!"

She spoons some ice-cream and feeds it to him. He blushes again. She says, "Sometimes you have to do the wrong thing to get the right result."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"OK, then: robbing banks is fun."

"I should arrest you..."

"Think you can take me?"

He says, "I hope so..." and she looks into his eyes and something breaks between them; and they kiss.

"Did you see it? Did you see me? I kicked the *shit* out of that little dwarf!" Goliath says. Ishtar says, "Yeah, whatever." She's annoyed. She doesn't like the water, she gets ear infections. And there was nothing down there, nothing at all. Her cheek hurts from where Eye-Patch hit her. "I hate that bastard," she says. Goliath says, "Language!"

"Oh, go away."

From Orchestra: a moody piece, half-amused and half-despondent. They go back to Solomon's place. Goliath makes coffee.

"So nu?" Solomon says.

Ishtar shakes her head. "Nothing."

"I told you," Solomon says (it's his most irritating habit), "we just have to wait and see what the Doctor does. There is usually method in his madness -" and he chuckles. Sometimes he chuckles so hard he can't stop.

Ishtar's had enough. "I'm going," she says.

From the kitchen, Goliath rumbles, "Good night."

From Orchestra: a fading tune. Solomon gets up, goes to Orchestra. "You can sleep here tonight," he says.

Music of acquiescence. Solomon smiles. Ishtar leaves.

When she gets to her apartment she runs the hot water and then has a bath, with bubbles, and she puts on soft music, and closes her eyes and tries not to think about anything at all. After

a time she comes out, dries herself, and goes to sleep.

4 In the Cabinet Office, a wide-screen TV on the wall, a face speaking, one-eyed, and the Minister of Agriculture says, "Is that Moshe Dayan?" and is

shushed by his colleagues.

Eye-Patch, staring into the camera, his face filling the screen. "If our demands are not met, we are prepared to flood the coastal areas of Haifa and Tel Aviv," he says. "Already the quake engines are installed deep in the seabed. At the press of a button -" he turns, and the camera zooms in on a small black console, where a single red button resides - "we can turn the country into a part of the sea." The camera returns to Eye-Patch, who is smiling. "This won't affect *you*, of course," he says, speaking to the assembled ministers. "Jerusalem is on high ground, after all."

"Exactly," says the Minister for Finance, from one of the Orthodox parties. "It sounds like a good idea to me, to wash away the sins of Tel Aviv! It is a godless city of secularism and sin. Go ahead, do it!"

"Are you insane?" the Prime Minister says. "Shut up." He turns to the screen. "What are your demands?"

"They're very simple," Eye-Patch says.

"What are they?" the Prime Minister says.

"Peace."

"Peace?"

A muttering amongst the ministers. Peace? What a ridiculous idea. Some unease. What is he talking about?

"A withdrawal of all settlements in the West Bank area," Eye-Patch says. "Formal acknowledgement of a Palestinian state. A return of the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for a peace accord -"

"Are you *insane*?" the Minister of Transport shrieks. Several other ministers are rising, waving their fists. Eye-Patch continues. "A release of all political prisoners. And the establishment of Jerusalem as a multi-partner autonomous urban entity -"

His voice is drowned in shouts. The Minister of Finance storms out of the room. The Prime Minister's hands shake and he reaches for a biscuit. "Your demands are impossible," he says. "You are worse than a terrorist."

"Oh, no," Eye-Patch says. "We are just as bad as terrorists. Gentlemen!" The hubbub dies down, slowly. "We are not nice people. We are not, as they say in popular parlance, superheroes. We are willing to do what it takes. You have twenty-four hours to reach an agreement. Otherwise..." His image blinks, is gone. Crumbs fall down the Prime Minister's shirt.

"Outrageous!"

"Terrorists!"

"We shall never surrender to their demands!"

The Prime Minister rises. He motions to his aide. The aide hurries away. Without a word the Prime Minister leaves the room.

"Extraordinary scenes are being played out here, in the dusty streets of Tel Aviv," the CNN reporter says into the camera. "As the demands of a group of super-villains are made public, citizens are marching in support of their government even as their city is under threat."

The camera shows men and women marching in the heat,

waving placards. DROWN FOR YOUR COUNTRY! – WE WILL NOT SURRENDER TO TERRORISM! – NEVER GIVE UP! – WE WELCOME THE SEA! The reporter says, “Marine businesses are experiencing a financial boom –” cut to a man working on the prow of a wooden boat – “We’re sold out of every boat in the inventory, even kayaks,” the man says. “And are working to meet demand. We’re working flat out –” he wipes sweat off his brow. Cut to the CNN reporter. “Sir. Sir! Can you share your thoughts with us?”

Picture of an elderly man walking a small dog. “What about?”
“The current threat against the Israeli government?”

“Oh, that. Well...” The man takes a deep breath. “I fought for this country in four wars!” he says. “Four!” He holds up four fingers. “We should never give in to blackmail.” He scratches the dog’s ear. “Saying that, though, I don’t think the idea of dividing Jerusalem is such a bad one. Just a pile of stones, really, when all’s said and done. And I don’t have much use for the Golan Heights either. In fact, I haven’t been out of Tel Aviv in – what, three, four years? We have cinemas, coffee shops, theatres, shopping malls – really, when you come right down to it – why not?”

Scratching the dog’s other ear. “But of course we must never give in to such preposterous demands.”

“Doctor Meshugeh is behind this,” Y. from the Mossad says.

“That meshugeneh putz,” the Prime Minister says.

“I’m afraid we can’t touch him. Even if we knew where his secret base was, he could activate the machinery before we got anywhere near him.”

“So what can we do?”

Y. shrugs. “What does the Palestinian Prime Minister say?”

“What do you think? He’s ecstatic. We’re losing *face* here, Y! The Syrians, the Lebanese, the *Iranians* – they will all think we’re *weak*! Is the army prepared?”

“Prepared for what?” says the Army Chief of Staff.

“War!”

“I thought they are demanding peace?”

“Are you dense?” the Prime Minister says.

“Sir?”

“Our appearing weak will signal to every Arab nation in the Middle East that they can finally initiate the war against us. Throw every last one of us into the sea!”

“In twenty-four hours that would hardly be necessary?” the Chief of Staff says. The Prime Minister bangs his fist on the table. “Damn it! Get me Solomon!”

Tank’s a bit uneasy about all the commotion. He is loyal to the Doctor but really, even he has some misgivings about the plan. He’s a big, strong guy: and he doesn’t quite see how giving the Arabs everything they want on a plate is going to do any good. He can’t even get to see Julia this morning: there are so many stressed people queuing up for a massage. For the first time it occurs to him that Doctor Meshugeh might really *be* mad. He decides to go the gym and runs into Goliath at the weights machine. “You,” Goliath says, grunting as he’s lifting. “Busted you good last night.”

“In your dreams, fat boy,” Tank says. He quite likes Goliath. “This plan of the Doctor is *stupid*,” Goliath says. “*You’re* stupid,” Tank says. Goliath grins. “Is that the best you can come up with?”

Tank shrugs. He lies down on the machine next to Goliath and begins lifting weights. “You know,” Goliath says unexpectedly, “I’m tired of fighting crime.”

That takes Tank by surprise. “What? Why?”

“Well, just because I’m big and strong, it doesn’t mean I always have to run around *helping* people, does it?”

“I guess,” Tank says. “What would you do otherwise, anyway?”

“Start my own gym,” Goliath says. “Or maybe run a falafel stand.”

“Huh,” Tank says.

“Of course, I never have the money to go my own way. Fighting crime doesn’t pay.”

“Crime does,” Tank says. He’d got a good stash from the recent bank robberies.

“I guess,” Goliath says.

“What sort of gym?” Tank says.

“A big one,” Goliath says. “With weights and a swimming pool and everything. A steam room. You know.”

“It sounds good.”

“Yeah.”

They continue to lift weights in silence.

“That was *amazing*,” Scorpion says. Speed rolls over and smiles at him. They cuddle up in bed and, after a time, turn on the TV.

Channel 2 News: “Concern is mounting over the blackmail plot of Doctor Meshugeh. In a hastily-convened meeting of the UN Security Council, the USA called for an emergency relief initiative, comprising a multinational taskforce, to be sent to Israel. Russia vetoed. Meanwhile, on the streets of Tel Aviv –”

Camera cuts to Dizengoff Street. A group of young women drinking coffee in Café Joe. “Where is a hero when you need one?” one of them says to the camera.

“Yeah!” her friend says. “We’re not moving. Let them flood the city!”

Channel 2 reporter: “What do you think of the so-called peace proposal?”

Girl #1: “It’s just another example of male chauvinistic dominance of Israeli politics. Men fighting men to make decisions – but what about the mothers? Huh?”

Girl #2: “Jerusalem is ours. It says so in the Bible. Why should we share it?”

A man at a nearby table. “Why? Because the Palestinians suffer while you drink coffee and chat to your friends, you insensitive bitch!”

Girl #1: “Hey! Don’t talk to her like that!”

Girl #2: “Pig.”

Man: “I fought for this country, and I still think it’s wrong the way the policy of occupation has been entrenched, time after time, in the –”

Girl #2 (making a rude gesture): “Occupy this!”

The screen goes black. Speed, with the remote. “So nu? What do you think?”

“This is so wrong,” Scorpion says.

“Why?”

“Because you can’t *force* people to make these kinds of decisions! They have to reach them themselves!”

“This country,” Speed says, “has been at war from before in-

dependence. Over sixty years. They're never going to make the decision. It has to be made for them."

"No," Scorpion says. "No."

"You can't stop it now," Speed says.

"They'd never give in," Scorpion says, and he feels a horror rising inside him, imagining the city drowning, the white buildings swallowed by the waves, corpses floating down abandoned streets... "We have to stop him."

"It's too late," Speed says again. And, "I'm hungry."

Scorpion thinks – there really isn't anything I can do. And there is strange relief in that, a lightening of a load he did not, until now, realise he was carrying. "We could go out," he says. "Go to the promenade."

"I want an omelette," Speed says. "Salad, cheese, strong coffee, fresh bread."

She gets up and begins to get dressed; and Scorpion follows.

"That's the stupidest plan I've ever heard," Ishtar says, still in a bad, unexplainable mood from the night before. Solomon² shrugs. "I don't know," he says. "I kind of like it."

Orchestra, in the shower, singing. No sign of Scorpion. Solomon² is watching TV and the phone rings. He picks it up. "Yes?"

Ishtar, a silent hand gesture – who?

"I see. Of course. I'll be right there." He hangs up. "Prime Minister. Wants to see me in Jerusalem. Want to come?"

"Can't stand that slimy bastard," Ishtar says. Solomon² tsks. "My, somebody's in a bad mood," he says. "Hey, I never voted for him," Ishtar says. Solomon² says: "That's always the Tel Aviv answer, isn't it."

They go out. Ishtar lifts Solomon² easily. "Let's go," she says. She rises into the air and shoots over the rooftops, towards Jerusalem; she only briefly entertains the thought of accidentally dropping Solomon².

Eye-Patch: "Think they'll go for it?"

Dr. Meshugah: "No."

Eye-Patch: "Me neither."

Dr. Meshugah: "It might be time for a little...demonstration."

Channel 1 News: "A giant wave has come out of nowhere at two forty three today, hitting the beach at Netanyah, where many had gathered in an impromptu celebration of what one participant called, 'The last day of sunbathing left.' Screaming people ran away as the wave hit, while surfers from all around the country hastened to the scene. 'This is awesome!' one of them told CNN. The Prime Minister's office was not available for comment."

The Prime Minister: "So?"

Solomon²: "I'm not sure what help I can give."

PM: "You're a *superhero*! It's your *job* to deal with this stuff!"

Solomon²: "Job? I work in hi-tech, with all due respect. Fighting crime doesn't pay the mortgage. Plus, well..."

PM: "Well what?"

Solomon²: "This is beyond the realm of, well, strictly speaking, *crime*, now."

PM: "What are you talking about?"

Solomon²: "It's become...political."

"PM: "You're damn right it's political!"

Solomon²: "Ah, but there lies, as they say, the rub. We're strictly *non*-political. Traditional crime only. I don't think it's right for us to *interfere*."

PM: "But Dr. Meshugah is!"

Solomon² shrugs: "Supervillains have different standards."

5 **Midnight. An empty rooftop over Tel Aviv. Lights** winking from the seafront promenade. The air warm, scented. Solar panels like dark mirrors facing the night. Scorpion standing, alone, watching the street lights and the cars.

"I hear you're going out with Speed," a voice says. Scorpion turns, says, "You."

"Me," Chameleon agrees.

"Go away."

Chameleon hisses. "I'm going to kill you," he says. Scorpion says, "Why?"

"Because," Chameleon says patiently, "We're mortal enemies."

"I thought your side wanted peace."

"That's just another of the Doctor's crazy schemes," Chameleon says. "Me, I don't care. Peace or no peace, there will always be crime. I'm a hero, not a politician."

"You're technically a villain," Scorpion says.

Chameleon smirks. "Says who?"

"I don't want to fight you."

"But I," Chameleon says, "want to fight *you*."

Scorpion turns, too late: Chameleon attacks, slashes at him, hissing, spitting poison. Scorpion's face burns and he changes. His sting lashes out, once, twice. Chameleon laughs and darts off against the wall. Scorpion follows.

They clash again in mid-air, fall, hit a parked car. Onlookers scream. Chameleon is striped with street light. Scorpion is wounded. Chameleon darts off again, down the road, and Scorpion follows on the attack.

In his sanctuary the Sabra sits still, monitoring moving lights. This is the way it should be, he feels. The way it once was. When heroes fought for the things that mattered, for the nation, not over petty crime. He respects the Doctor for making his move – it invigorates him. For the first time in years he feels the country needs him.

Alone in his hidden sanctuary he puts on the uniform. He hadn't worn it for a long time. He presses a button and a section of the wall slides open, and he steps into his armoury, looks over his weapons. Once they were specially made for him, by the best scientists in the army. The cactus juice, the thorn-shooter, the cacti grenades... He presses another button and watches the screen as a beam of light comes alive in the night sky of Tel Aviv, the Sabra's signal, a giant, native Israeli cactus. He is ready. He presses the last button and the roof opens above him, and he shoots off into the sky.

"What about recognising a Palestinian state, but keeping the settlements?" the Prime Minister says.

"We absolutely can't give way on the Jerusalem question," the Minister for Education says. A Minister without a Portfolio says, "It would make us look good with the UN, not to mention the Vatican."

"The Vatican!" the Minister of Education snorts. The Prime Minister massages his temples. It's been a long day. "What about establishing the Golan Heights as a UN buffer zone?"

"We have people who've lived there for forty years!" the Minister for Energy says. The Prime Minister says, "Well, this way they can stay."

"And live with Syrians? Are you mad?"

"At least he didn't mention Lebanon," someone says. Everyone nods.

"What was wrong with the way we did things?" the Minister for Justice says. "It's worked so far."

"Has it?" from the Minister without Portfolio. The Minister of Justice stares at him. "What exactly do you *do* here?" he says.

"The Americans are very sympathetic," the Minister of Public Works says.

"Well, they would be."

"The Arab press is having a field day with this."

"We will not give in to blackmail!"

"What we need," the Prime Minister says, "is an old-fashioned kind of hero."

Goliath says, "We should do something."

Ishtar, drinking coffee. "Like what?"

"Attack them at their secret base."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No." Pause. "It's secret."

"Right."

"We could follow one of them."

"I guess."

"The city could flood tomorrow!"

"I'm tired," Ishtar says. She's got another date lined up for tonight. It might be the last night of Tel Aviv. Might as well go in style. Goliath says, "Ishtar?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Tank would make a good partner? I mean a business partner? Like, a personal trainer at, like, a gym?"

She looks over at him. Solomon² and Orchestra had gone out. "Why? I mean, sure, I think he probably would, Goliath."

"No reason. Thanks. I was just thinking."

"I've got to run," Ishtar says. "Good luck with the thinking."

After she leaves, Goliath hesitantly picks up the phone.

"Peace!" Doctor Meshugheh says. "So close! It is within our grasp, Eye-Patch! Peace in the Middle East! Peace in our time! Peace –"

"Oh, screw it," Eye-Patch says, and the knife slides oh so easily into the Doctor's chest, and Doctor Meshugheh falls silent. "I thought you'd never stop talking!" Eye-Patch says. Then he begins to laugh. It is a big, echoing, sprawling, uncontrollable laugh.

When at last it is over, Eye-Patch picks up the phone. He says, "Our demands have been slightly altered..."

"Are you doing anything?"

Scorpion pauses, says, "Not really." He's bleeding from a couple of cuts.

"Want to go see a movie?"

"To be honest, I'm –"

"At my place. We'll rent a DVD."

Scorpion smiles, holds the phone to his ear. "Sure," he says. "That'd be great."

Chameleon is still out there somewhere. Scorpion shrugs and walks away. There will always be another day to catch up.

Champagne bottles are popping their corks – kosher fizzy wine from the Rothschild vineyard. The Prime Minister says, "All he wants are a few million Euros in a Swiss bank account!"

"We can do that!" says the Minister of Finance.

"You should know," says the Minister for Media, Sports and Entertainment.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Oh, I think you know *exactly* what I mean by that."

"Relax," the Prime Minister says. "We'll take it out of the –"

"Not the yeshivas budget!" says the Minister of Religion.

"Not the army budget either!" says the Minister of Security.

"Not the farming subsidies!" says the Minister of Agriculture.

"We'll just raise taxes and put it down to peace talks," the Prime Minister says.

"So what do you do?" Daniel says. He is quite nice. Tall, hair cut short, a good dresser. He has a nice smile. Ishtar picks at her salad. "Temping, mostly," she says. "I'm thinking of finding something more permanent."

Daniel is something in IT. When he leans over she can smell his aftershave. His hand is on hers, and suddenly her day is getting much, much better.

At the Doctor's secret base there is a terrible tearing sound, and the Sabra breaks through the wall and faces Eye-Patch. "You?" Eye-Patch said. "I thought you retired!"

"When the country needs me, I am always there!" the Sabra says. "I have come to stop you."

"That seems evident," Eye-Patch says. He stifles a yawn. It's been a long day, and he has a flight to catch at Ben Gurion airport in under an hour. "Unfortunately, the plan's changed."

The Sabra looks sideways, notices Dr. Meshugheh's prone body, the knife still sticking out. "Ah," he says. He seems to deflate a little, and his thorns retreat inside his skin.

"Yes, well, no need to worry about giving back land," Eye-Patch says, trying for cheerful. "Everything's worked out."

"I could still take you in," the Sabra says. Eye-Patch shrugs, smiles. "What good will it do you? I'm just a common criminal."

"No land for peace?"

"Just a straightforward business transaction."

The Sabra just stands there. Eye-Patch picks up a suitcase, heads for the door.

"I'll see you in the funny pages," he says.

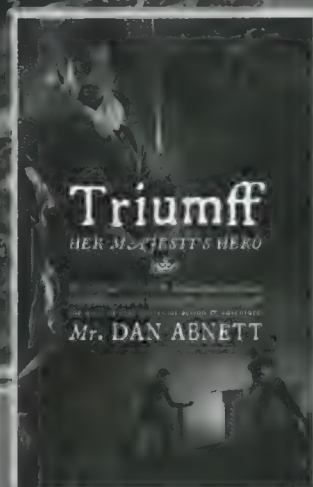
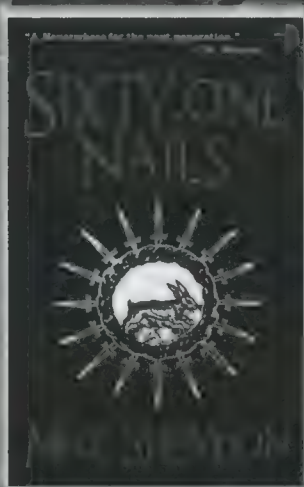
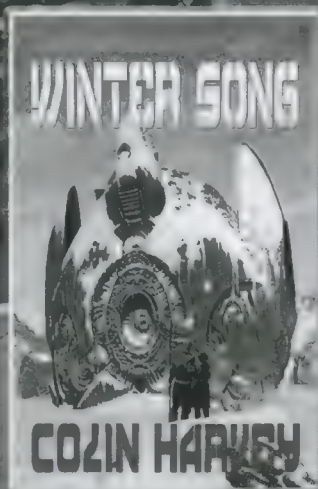
Lavie Tidhar is the author of linked-story collection *HebrewPunk* (2007), novellas *An Occupation of Angels* (2005), *Cloud Permutations* (2009) and *Gorel & The Pot-Bellied God* (2010) and, with Nir Yaniv, of *The Tel Aviv Dossier* (2009). His first novel, *The Bookman*, will be published by HarperCollins' new Angry Robot imprint in Spring 2010, and will be followed by two others.

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It's not what you think. The chalk-white hills give our place its name, rising cleanly from the cold blue water of the bight. Not anything more nefarious or other-worldly. That's what we tell the tourists, anyway. Hiding in plain sight.

Although, if you think about it, what is chalk? Or limestone, or what have you – nothing more than the bones of billions of long-dead sea creatures.

So maybe it's not such a bad name after all. Bone Island. My terrible home.

Sara Maarinen set her mind against me from the moment she arrived on the island. I could say that I don't know why, and there is truth in that, although of course everything is always more complicated than it seems.

I can explain.

First I have to tell you about the cottage in the tall weeds that grow like Circe's loom-weavings amid the rocks and heather of the lower meadows. The cottage that is said to contain the long-dead spirits of Bone Island, along with some of the bones of our ancestors.

See, I have misled you already. The bones, they are there. They jut up from the earth of the cottage's garden, pushing rotted boards from broken coffins before them. They are restless in their repose.

A woman used to live in that cottage. She could have been my grandmother. Hell, she could have been Eve's grandmother, she was so old. Those weeds were her herbs once. That cottage was her home, a single wisp of blue smoke spiraling ever upward like a lost soul seeking heaven. She delivered babies and physicked sick milch-cows and knew where to dig for the best water, and

ILLUSTRATED BY MARK PEXTON

Shannon Page was born on Halloween night and spent her formative years on a commune in northern California's backwoods. A childhood without television gave her a great love of books and the worlds she found in them. She wrote her first book, an adventure story starring her cat, at the age of seven. Sadly, that work is currently out of print. Shannon is a longtime practitioner of Ashtanga yoga, has no tattoos, and lives in San Francisco with nineteen orchids.

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works on numerous writing and editing projects. His 2009 novels are *Green* from Tor Books, *Madness of Flowers* from Night Shade Books, and *Death of a Starship* from MonkeyBrain Books. His short fiction appears regularly in literary and genre markets worldwide. Jay is a winner of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and a multiple nominee for the Hugo and World Fantasy Awards.

"This story was inspired by a medical anomaly, of all things. Whose anomaly and what we leave as an exercise for the reader."

BONE ISLAND

SHANNON PAGE & JAY LAKE

so people called her a witch.

The Bone Island Witch, of course, though that sounds mostly like something you'd see in a tourist brochure.

But what is a witch? You might ask the same question about a doctor or a preacher. Someone with a little special knowledge and the good of the world lodged in some corner of their heart will always seem like a threat to many. (At least, that's what we tell the tourists.)

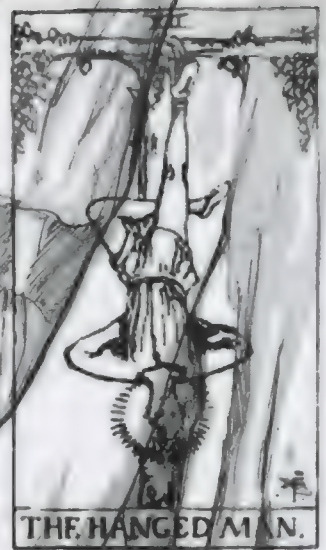
But the witch died, as even the oldest women do. There is no ultimate reward for outliving your contemporaries. She was buried not amid the restless bones of her own yard (for she truly was a witch) but just outside the rusted iron fence around the

Moravian Church Cemetery at the edge of the Commons. The cemetery for respect, outside the fence Just In Case.

It was the Bone Island Witch whose empty, pointed shoes Sara Maarinen came to fill.

It was she who set in motion everything that went wrong afterwards, when the restless bones danced and the white beaches ran with red.

Sara came from the mainland. She showed up one fine morning with a lawyer and a real estate agent and a briefcase full of official papers demonstrating beyond the shadow of a doubt that she owned the cottage. It had been left to her by an elderly



THE HANGED MAN.



WHEEL OF FORTUNE.



THE LOVERS.

maiden aunt – not our witch, no, although those fancy papers traced a lineage back to her in some complicated and ultimately inarguable way. They were French papers, festooned with bright golden seals and official stamps and pale blue ribbons. French bureaucracy is the most serious kind.

Even so, she brought the lawyer for additional seriousness. And she brought the real estate agent because she planned to sell the cottage at once. That was, of course, before she saw it.

I know all this because I'd made it my business to keep an eye on the unquiet place these past few years.

I also know all this because Bone Island is small and everyone understands everyone else's least privacies, in the way of good inbred communities the world over.

But mostly I know all this because when the bones walked anew and the blackest crows came to haunt the cottage walls, Sara herself took me in her arms and set in motion the end of the story. The story I will now set down in these pages. The story that may save you, if you heed it true. Because although your details surely differ from ours, the magic underneath holds from Bone Island to Cape Town to the tip of Greenland, and everywhere in between.

"Don't you be listening to her," Grant Archerson said. He stood before me, tiny beads of sweat forming along his jaw, just below the scar.

I looked away, gave a wink to Janey Iverson instead, out without her little one this fine evening, then took a long drink of my ale. I swallowed and wiped my mouth with the back of a hand before answering Grant. "Why not?"

Grant eyed the frosty glass on the bar, measuring the size of my appetite, my greed. My thirst. If he only knew. "She's not right, that's all." He shrugged, as if to say, *Isn't it obvious?*

But what is obvious? That a raven-haired woman from across the sea should bring trouble? Of course she would, and she wouldn't be the first. Trouble we knew, trouble we had aplenty on Bone Island. You might almost say we looked for it.

I opened my mouth to say so, but Grant's eyes flicked to the door behind me even as I felt the cool night air on my back. It would be her, of course. Grant shook his head and turned away.

I wiped the smile from my face before I looked around. The words died in my throat as I gazed upon Christina.

"I thought so," she said. Without moving her eyes, she somehow took in the entire room and dismissed it. I saw the shiver of a stranger tucked at a corner table. "Come on now – home with you."

I wanted to apologize, to explain. Not to Christina. To the rest of them.

There are many creation stories, and all of them are wrong. Who could know the mind of Goddess, after all? Her dreams encompass more than the sum of human thought. The merest blink of Her eye is aeons in the passing. Her thoughts are slow tsunamis which ripple through the world invisible and destructive as a plague.

In some of those stories, a god or the son of a god is slain. His bones become mountains, his skin becomes the land, his blood becomes the rivers and oceans. This is true enough in its way, as anyone who has ever known the lore of a Corn King can attest.

Blood on the plow is the oldest sacrament of civilization, once bounds were first measured and the land settled in harness. The queen picked her husband, lay with him before her cheering subjects, then split his skull with a mattock or a hoe or an obsidian knife that his newly-royal blood might bless the land.

So it is with the world. Those many creation stories are wrong, but they all carry truth like the germ waiting in an old pauper's grave. There are bones in the world, greater and deeper than even the thunder lizards of times long before. Bone Island is almost the last such outcropping, a place where once angels feasted on the corpse of a god.

Imagine if you will a place where every speck of soil, the walls of every well, the foundation of every home, is infused with a magic older than the line of monkeys from which we are descended. Time is nothing to Goddess, and everything. She is ancient of days and new as a baby's blue eye all at once. How can her power be less than that which we drink and breathe and eat every day?

Still, from time to time some leave the island, or a local brings back a husband from a farther-away place. We thought Sara Maarinen was the grandchild of such a marriage, an outcross. Her grandmother had taken something from the heart of Bone Island which in the end drew Sara home.

The boat put in at the barnacle-encrusted dock on an eerily calm Tuesday in the month of July. A trim figure with stridently raven hair stood in the bow, leaning forward and putting a hand to her forehead, as if posing. She needn't have bothered. We'd all be watching, oh yes we would.

She wore serious city clothes, all in black except for a vivid fuchsia scarf, and foolish high-heeled shoes. She carried a bag made from the skins of exotic rodents, filled with new-world magic: a telephone that needed no wires, a calendar made without paper.

We were not impressed. Bone Island keeps its secret ways, but not from ignorance. From choice. Besides, the tricky little batteries in those things have a way of failing here amid the limitless ocean and the ancient land.

The press of Christina's fingers was still strong upon my left shoulder. There would be bruises there later, like the tattoos of scattered grapes. She'd done a reading, and drawn from me in the process. Not magic, this, not in the new-world sense of wizards and sparkles and spells from Under the Hill.

Just a way of listening to the world, more carefully than most would credit. It can be done anywhere – our limestone and talc hills are no more a requirement than the black dresses or the mouse blood. In other days, corpse-tallow candles were used to open the reading sight, but one can do it with a Bic lighter.

Someone to draw on, to draw down on, was part of it as well. "She comes, Cary," Christina had said. Her touch was warm to the edge of painful. The bones in my shoulder ached. "The cottage cries, the soil churns."

The soil always churns, I thought. By ant or plow or restless spirit, it never stops. All I said was, "Yes," in the voiceless whisper which usually pleased her most.

"Scatter salt beneath her feet." Christina's free hand darted like a bluebottle wasp, pressed a soft bag into my grip. Because it couldn't be just any salt. She'd released me then, and I'd slumped forward as I always do at those moments.

At the dock I spread my burden. Salt by the sea would seem as pointless as taking blood to the butcher's, but everything has a purpose. Old Kennewick sailing the boat on its twice daily trip across the bight would know better than to step out before this woman in urban black.

Even if he hadn't seen the grainy sparkle drifting from my hand, he'd understand what my presence meant. As for the salt itself, let her track the stuff far and wide. Some magics are so simple as to be nothing but good sense.

I stepped forward and extended a hand to help her out of the boat. "Welcome to Bone Island, Mistress...?"

Sara Maarinen – for I already knew her name full well – stared at my fingers as if they were scabbed over. She set her mouth and accepted my help, coming up onto the dock. "I am Ms. Maarinen," she told me, as if announcing foreign royalty.

I flashed her my pub grin, the one that usually got me a kiss at least, if not free beer and undivided female attention. "And I suppose I'm not. Cary Palka, at your service."

"I don't believe I know any Palkas," she said with a tone that could have frosted pumpkins. She turned back to Kennewick. "Have this boy take my bags to the White Rock Inn."

Old Kennewick tugged on his hat brim like an idiot parody of some pastoral peasant. As she turned away I saw venom on his face. Not for me, but for Sara Maarinen. I nodded, rolling my eyes in a way which everyone around here knew meant "Christina."

He began to laugh, an emphysemal wheezing fit to compete with the crying of the circling gulls. And then he pushed off from the dock almost before I could grab the blessed suitcases.

She took the best room in the White Rock, of course, though it meant shoving aside Dorothy Iverson's cousin Sheila, here for her annual month-long visit. I know she would have taken it anyway, even if it hadn't had a direct view of the cottage; she was just that sort of person. And she organized Gertrude to bring her room service breakfast – coffee, biscuits, and blood sausage on a tidy little tray. So maybe she knew her own island power already. Certainly she was accustomed to getting her way, without question.

Her lawyer and real estate agent, newly arrived on the biweekly mail plane, had to make do with lesser rooms.

They got started right quick the next day, at the crack of noon, when a freshly bathed Sara descended the creaking staircase of the White Rock with a black leather briefcase under her arm and a swath of papers in her hand. *Look at her highness*, I thought, seeing her. *Hot water brought to her room too!* I smiled at Gertrude, who aimed a slap at my sore shoulder I had to dance to avoid.

"Don't you be grinning at things you don't understand, boy," she hissed.

"Oh, I think I understand this just fine, Gertie," I said, then darted for the back door. It was time to feed the ducks. And even if it wasn't, I was going to do it anyway.

Outside, the howling fog-wind hit me in the face like a drunk's well-aimed fist. I growled back into the teeth of it, pushing forward even as it threatened to slam me against the building. Ah, summer on Bone Island. The yews flung fat droplets on my head as I passed by them, squinting. I couldn't even see the pond, though it was scarcely twenty steps from the inn's back door.

But I could hear the ducks chortling to their peeping young as they paddled about in the wind-whipped cress. They finally saw me and converged at the muddy bank.

I reached into the pocket of my greatcoat and pulled out the bag of salt. "Well, now, what is this?" I asked aloud. The ducks looked back at me. "For certain this was all scattered yesterday, and yet here it is anew?"

The ducks made no answer. It was not cracked corn and yard-berry seeds, and that was all they knew.

There's magic and there's magic. Any fool can dream on spells wrestled from ancient, smoking grimoires, but the truth of that is near enough to nothing but dreams and legends. Things people want to believe, because the details seem so right. Plenty of stagecraft to support their opinions, until some folk confuse those opinions with facts. Noisy magic is rare, but not impossible.

The magic of salt and stone, of seeing and saying, of water and wind – that's the magic which can be found in the world by an observant child. Watch a cat at a sun-drenched winter window for a long, quiet while. Eventually you may catch Tabby with frost on her paws, save without ever first hearing the creak of the door.

That second, the quiet magic, is what was held tight-clutched by the Bone Island Witch, may the pennies never leave her eyes. Others of us too, Christina most of all, have the knowing. It's a magic which will never show a purple sparkle, wouldn't be caught dead in a silver moon hanging chainwise around a pretty little neck. Quiet magic is everywhere but improbable.

That magic made the salt which I spread by the dock. Noisy magic returned it to my pocket, rude as a fart at a funeral and twice as distressing.

We already knew Sara Maarinen was trouble. We just hadn't known what kind of trouble. Leaving the ducks to their querulous displeasures, I headed through the fog for Christina's home, above the boarded windows of the old Leister Mercantile.

Pressing through the familiar weather, it came to me that maybe this fog-wind wasn't quite so ordinary as I'd thought. This was summer, which was ever a cold, cold season on Bone Island, but the sun wasn't even a pale glower above. If not for the clocks in the sitting room of the White Rock, I'd have had no notion whether the world was in dusk, dawn or in between.

Had Sara Maarinen called the weather to her? She had the law on her side, a shield of papers and agency as impenetrable as any stopping web. Even the oldest gammer with her leather clogs and milky eye-of-wisdom couldn't do better than a city lawyer.

The new woman didn't need to call the wind. But it had come, perhaps of its own accord. Maybe it followed her, punished her, threatened to thrust her back from whence she came. Or it could have been the old Witch, complaining from her mossy grave outside the churchyard.

How would I know, anyway? I didn't have the power of a reading. I was just a human battery. In times before, I would have been a sacrifice atop one of the old bluestones on the high bluffs to the north. Now I was Christina's sweetling, giving of myself, but well supplied with ale and bed favors in exchange for my continued services.

It wasn't ale or bed favors I was wanting today, though. It

was knowing how the salt had jumped back into the bag, and how the bag had jumped back into the pocket of my greatcoat. Sure as the cemetery gates creak, it wasn't the majesty of the law which had done this.

Christina would be furious, but she'd be smart enough not to blame me for the business. Probably. I shivered as the Mercantile loomed out of the driving fog. The side stairs were slippery as ever, but my feet knew them well.

Up to her well-decorated door, and knocked three short raps – tak, tak, tak – as was our arrangement. I stood as the wind buffeted me, amusing myself with leaning into it, letting the steady push of its force hold me suspended over the railing. The wind, in turn, amused itself with letting up every so often, threatening to throw me to the muddy track below. We fought to a standoff, and Christina had not come to the door.

Tak, tak, tak. And silence, save the howling gale about me. Most peculiar.

I did not dare put my ear to her door or my eye to her keyhole. The memory still stung from the last time I'd taken such unwonted liberties. Instead, I rapped once more, then gave a heavy sigh and took my thirsty body back down the reeking stairs.

Sara Maarinen herself was before me as I took the final step. I had not seen her coming, and you may well believe I had been looking. She was much on my mind, and then she was clutching the raw woolen collar of my coat and pulling, pulling. She drew my reluctant ear to her lipsticked mouth and whispered, "You'll not find what you need up there, young Palka. Though it may amuse you to tumble in her bed, she is no gift for you."

I reached for my easy pub grin, but it slipped from my grasp even as I drew away from Sara's hiss. "I...you don't..." Words failed me.

"My cottage," she said. "I am told you hold the key. You will take me there now."

I looked up and down the street, but no one ventured out into the howl and the whine that poured down from the angry skies. No, this I would have to do on my own.

It had ever been so, since Grandfather had given me the Palka legacy.

Sara Maarinen let go of my coat and spun around, marching down the street without a glance behind her. As I followed, I noted the sparkle of salt at her heels.

Grandfather had been generally accounted a difficult man. Famously so, in fact, and this on an island renowned for difficult people. Our folk were stubborn as the Irish, thick as the Norwegians, and as slow to forgive as any vengeful moneylender of old. Bone Island had feuds which dated back before the Christ came to our shores, rooted in such trivial causes as pig-thievery and fence-hopping.

We are a proud people, and we are proudest of the fossils carried in the bedrock of our pride.

Yet even among these folk, who could turn a single misspoken word into the slow burning sport of a seasons-long quarrel, Grandfather Palka had been another kind of man entirely. He must have been young once, for no one is born into their later age, but by the time I came along to know him, there wasn't a soul to testify to whatever wit or charm or grace had sustained him through his younger years, two wives and three mistresses.

My grandfather was an iron bastard with flinty eyes and bones which might just as well have been quarried out of the island itself. He didn't have either kind of magic, just the cynical wisdom of an old man in a hardscrabble place.

It was he who took me out into the raddled hawthorn copse that filled the ravine behind the Palka Farm. It was he who showed me the cave hidden behind the brambles that lined the stand of trees. It was he who took me within, to the broke altar and the old stone ax with stains as deep as time.

"Cary," he'd said. "Time was the business of living got done here."

Grandfather wasn't much for talking, either, beyond "pass the salt." That alone was very nearly a lecture. When he went on after a long slow breath, I was amazed. "Our name means 'priest' in the old tongue. It also means 'keeper'."

He looked at me sidelong, those gray eyes sparkling like the sea beneath a storm front.

I nodded to show I was serious, that I was listening, that I wasn't scared. All lies, of course, but a hard man of five decades can see through even the lies of a barely teen-aged boy, as I was then.

"Got no duties now except memory. The witches took the business from us long ago." His fingers brushed the ax, its crude handle perhaps generations old, yet still surely renewed time and again across the span of Bone Island's history until the original was only a memory of a memory. "And we let them keep it," he added. "You won't be wanting it back."

After a while in which the wind whickered at the shallow cave mouth and the reek of salt almost overcame me, I asked the question which seemed obvious to me. "Sir, what is it I am to remember?"

"Why there is still blood on this ax after a dozen dozen generations," he said slowly. "What it is that brings the midwinter sun to the sky and spring crops from the soil." He looked at me again, the ax forgotten now. "And that you, a Palka, are always going to be alone, until you can give the duty to a son or nephew or grandson."

Alone, that was me, following Sara Maarinen to the witch's cottage. The garden was turned as if freshly plowed, though I knew better. The windy fog had lifted a bit, so the feral orchards behind the house could be spied in silhouette like a line of acromegalic soldiers on sentry duty.

The Palka legacy was a flinty old ax and a hole in the ground, and I had neither of them now. Only the memory of something I didn't understand, and the stirring certainty that whatever had baffled Christina's magic and worried everyone here on the island was tied into the that old, old business the witches had taken from one of my grandfather's grandfathers, back when the sun was redder and the ice lay on the ocean so the wolves could cross the bight.

"You know it's mine," Sara Maarinen said. She had stopped all a-sudden on the path and now stood facing me, her fingers pressing into the bruises Christina had left behind.

She understood too much, this woman with the noisy magic.

"No, I don't know that," I told her, and wondered how the hell those words had found their way out of my mouth. Clearly I was on my own way to being famously difficult. Or possibly famously dead, if my stirring intuition was not simply spinning

nightmares out of no cloth at all.

Where *was* Christina?

Sara smiled, at long last. She let my shoulder go and tossed her raven-colored hair over her shoulder, in a gesture I would have understood utterly coming from an island girl in the pub; from Janey Iverson out and about without her daughter, or Ruth Wilder, before she'd taken up with Connor Makepeace. But from Sara, it only served to shrink my manhood – what of it still remained as I shivered through this frigid wind from off the sea.

"You know it's mine," she repeated, and then all I could do was follow her again.

Of course she was a witch, descended from the witches. I'd been fooling myself before, pretending doubt. We all had, and a poor showing on us to have done so, but so we did. In our defense, the witches' line had thinned and faltered, strained through the outcrossed blood from the mainland folk, till the best anyone who still had the touch could do was call a few crows to her side, and then only if they felt like it. (The crows, that is.) The old one, buried outside the churchyard fence, had been the last true witch. Too many of us secretly thought this a good thing.

There were some who could, as Christina did, see things that weren't there, at least not yet. It's a small magic, but there were a few times in my life when I'd have not turned it down.

Such as the moment we arrived at the front door of the Bone Island Witch's cottage. I'd have given any number of brimming pints of fresh ale to know what I'd find within, without having to open the door first, with this terrible woman hovering at my shoulder.

Sara gave me that chilly grin again, the one that had unmanned me on the path. "Let me in, Palka."

I stood on the stoop in the blowing, grime-gray fog, trying not to shake. My hands clung to the insides of my greatcoat pockets like Gracie Fenniman had to the bones of her tug after it broke up on Deacon's Rock last winter. My arms would not obey the command of my brain. I was certain that Sara Maarinen was going to commit foul magic on me if I did not move, but still I stood.

Then I felt her move a step closer to me, and the moment was shattered. I hauled out the skeleton key and shoved it into the lock. Something crusty and white fell out and fluttered to the ground – not salt, not this time. Something worse. And it was jammed in the lock, so I had to wrestle the key. But there was no turning back now. Sara's breath was thick and greedy in my ear as she leaned in, watching the key in the hole. I smelled her breakfast of blood sausage and pork-fat-laden biscuits, and had to swallow my rising gorge with an effort.

The key slipped, and finally turned.

The door eased open as if it had not been shut up these long lonely years.

I'd first met Christina shortly after Grandfather had shown me the duty. I mean, I'd always known her. Everybody on Bone Island knows everybody else, or at the least we're aware of each other. She'd been a senior in our tiny school when I first started, impossibly tall and old, practically an adult. When I was biking down chalky paths to risk a cliff-top header into the ocean, she'd been doing whatever young adults do on an island with less

than a dozen retail businesses.

I've seen TV. I know on the mainland kids get jobs at the mall or join the Army or live in huge apartments in New York City with a dozen of their friends. Some of them even go to college. Some of *us* even go to college. We're not ignorant.

Not Christina. Whatever she did in those years was invisible to me, though of course later on I realized she was finding the quiet magic.

When Grandfather showed me the duty, I was fourteen. Scruffy beard which wouldn't fool anybody but the boy in the mirror, narrow shoulders stuck up high in a pretense of manly pride, saved from my own social ineptitude only by a ready smile and the curious kindnesses of a small place where everyone understands one another's faults and loves them anyway.

When a slender twenty-five-year-old Christina stopped me on the town's one paved street – cobbles, not macadam, for we have far more rocks than tar in this place – of course I paid attention to her. She was pretty. I was young. She was a woman. I was convinced I was a man already.

"You're a Palka," she said.

I stared at her: I knew she knew that. "The Palka, really." Mother and Father were already gone, and Grandfather, well, he was old. That's how I saw it then, when in effect the entire universe had only been created a decade and a half earlier at the moment of my birth.

"The Palka." Something in her smile made my groin twitch. I squirmed on my bike saddle. Christina continued: "Come see me sometime. I live over the Mercantile."

My god, I thought. *I have a date*. With a real woman. With *breasts* and everything.

"Um, yeah, sure." I was so cool. I even flipped my hair.

The smile changed, and I felt very small then. The wind changed with it, bringing the salt-and-rot smell off the harbor, and when I glanced away for a moment to take the sting from my eyes, she was gone.

I don't suppose I need to tell you what happened when I went up to her place. No wild fantasies, no sexual initiations. She wanted to talk about seeings and blood and the old families of Bone Island. Beautiful and dangerous as Christina was, it was like talking to Grandfather.

What I didn't understand until later was that the sex would come when I opened myself up to her seeings. And when it did come, it wasn't anything like I'd hoped it would be. But by then it was much too late.

The old witches, they didn't need boys like me. They carried it all within themselves, the noisy power.

The duty, it belonged to me, if only I could understand it. It was all connected, like a trapline beneath the leaves.

With that thought, I realized the brass knob beneath my hand was as cold as Sara Maarinen's bloody breath on my neck.

"Go on, boy," she said, eerily gentle. "Or are you afraid?"

"Ma'am," I said fervently. "I am always afraid."

With the lock unleashed, the door pulled at my hand as if the haints within tugged on it in their eager, unquiet rest. I let the knob go and the door fell open as I blinked my eyes in disbelief.

Inside, it was just as we had left it. The chairs were neatly set around the polished oaken table, the small bed was made up, and the air was fresh with a faint scent of pine, as though Gertie

had come down with her needle-broom and swept up ten minutes ago.

Strangest of all, of course, was the bright sunlight that slanted through the small back window.

I stood in the doorway, staring at the golden light. It couldn't be.

"Well?" Sara Maarinen hissed.

"I..." My voice died in my throat. I tried to step back, to look at the sky behind me, back in the real world. It was as gray and sopping as ever. The fog was still roaring up from the bight again, loping along on its big senseless panther feet.

Sara laid her cold silver eyes on me. "You what, Palka?"

I swallowed a hard lump in my throat and tore my gaze away from the impossible window. "Nothing." I led her into the cottage. *Her* cottage, according to mainland law and the magic of paperwork.

She pushed past me, her city clothes making little silken whispery sounds as she went by. Straight for the diadem that Grandfather had hammered into the far wall she went, and when she got there, she put her thin white hands on it so eagerly it made me quiver. I watched her, unable to do anything else. After a minute I realized she was speaking, or crooning, but low, under her breath. I couldn't make out any words. Maybe she was just humming at it as she caressed the evil thing.

All the while she ignored the sunlit window, so I did too. At least, I did not speak of it. I remained in the doorway, waiting for my next instructions.

That was when Christina showed up.

Back when my parents had first died, Grant Archerson spent some time taking an interest in me. Avuncular, I think the word is – like an old uncle. Nothing creepy. Here on Bone Island, all the real weirdos seem to be women.

Nothing magical, either. I mean, I talk about it all the time, I think about it all the time, but really, most people here are just people. Maybe they know a bit more about what some things mean than mainlanders. The one fencepost with a shadow stretching the wrong way round at dusk. Why the swallows fly just *that* way over the Moravian Church steeple. When not to knock on the witch's cottage door.

That's not magic. That's situational awareness.

And Grant was about as unmagical as a wooden spoon.

What he was, was the guy who ran the Tossed Pot, one of two bars on Bone Island. The other was the Scupper, down by the fishing pier, and mostly the working sailors drank there, along with anyone come in crewing a boat who wasn't local. Nice enough place, if you like everything to smell and taste like fried fish (or fried fisherman), but the conversation lags quickly once you talk about anything that doesn't involve a hull on open water.

The Tossed Pot, on the other hand, was the sort of bar that tourists dream of discovering. Which pretty much all of the ones we get do, since it's also the only public restaurant on the island besides the dining room of the White Rock. There's a dozen places to eat easy enough, if you drop by with a load of bread and pound of butter for the table, but only one with a signboard and a menu and beer taps. Inside looks like the club room of another age, faded Imperial ambitions and war mementos

brought home by men who fought under the tropical sun in woolen uniforms and puttees.

Which was total bullshit, of course. Grant bought that stuff up from catalogs, and swapped out the decor two or three times a year. A sort of hobby.

But he was also a hell of a nice guy, who kept track of what happened to the kids young and old. You wanted to ask about Dolly Paternoster's daughter, drop by the Pot and chat up Grant. Dolly slept under a mossy granite headstone now, but Margot wrote Grant a postcard every few months. The little kids, too.

So when Father fell out of Old Kennewick's boat trying to save a crate of Mark Fenniman's chickens in a rising storm, Grant knew before I did. A week later Mother disappeared down at Bishop's Head looking for the body on the tide. Or maybe she went for a swim to join him. I've never known, and Christina never said. But Grant probably knows, and he came looking for me even before Granddaddy found out.

For a while I lived half at the Tossed Pot and half at the Palka farm. I was too young to drink, even by Bone Island standards, and Grant had enough situational awareness to see where I was headed in life – college wasn't in the script, he knew that – so he gently sent me back to the farm until I outgrew it as all farm children do.

But still, if I had a father on this place, a father of the heart, it was Grant Archerson. I don't think he liked my bedwandering ways, and he never thought much of how I let Christina use me, but he still cared enough to keep tabs on me, and speak up from time to time.

Right now I was wishing mightily I'd listened to him, earlier on or just now. Being caught between Christina and Sara Maarinen was like being ground between two stones.

"What are you doing?" Christina asked, with that look in her eye and the barbed wire edge in her voice.

I turned to see what Sara Maarinen would say to this when Christina grabbed me right on the sore part of my shoulder.

It was me she was talking to.

Sara looked up anyway, and I swear to all the old gods and tiny fishes, she smiled.

I stood between the two women, staring from one fine-featured face to the other. Only then did I see their strong resemblance. Of course, Sara's city-cut hair and fancy clothes were as much of a distraction as Christina's tangled locks and honest island woolens, but that was no excuse for my not noticing it before.

"Well, Palka? Are you going to answer her?" Sara's voice slashed into my dumb reverie. What did it matter if they were kin? The whole island was kin, if you counted back far enough.

I shook my head and gave Christina my sweetest smile, but she could read the terror on my face as though it were scrawled there in charcoal. Her eyes bored into me, and then she shook her head ever so slightly.

Behind me, Sara's laugh flowed into the room. It was as false as the sunlight from the far window, but it rang sweet. "I guess the cat's got his tongue," she said, now leaning against the wall so that her upper back touched the diadem. "He said he wanted to welcome me to the cottage, so I took him up on it. And such a charming little place it is!" She spread her arms as if showing off the place to prospective tenants.

Christina gave a low hiss as I struggled to find my voice. It

was a lie, a foul and terrible lie! And where had Christina been? I could say nothing. Christina still held my bruised shoulder. I thought she'd draw blood.

"I don't know your full game yet, witchdaughter, but this is not yours." Christina's grip tightened as she spoke. I didn't know if she was referring to the cottage or to me, but Sara's eyes widened nonetheless. "You would do well to board that ferry and hie yourself back where you came from before harm is done here."

Sara's expression did not change. "You know I cannot do that." Her voice was a lesson in cool, calm, and collected. Of course, *her* shoulder wasn't being wrenched from her body.

"Don't tell me what I do and do not know." Christina almost whispered the last words.

The cottage darkened in that moment, as the window behind Sara began to admit the reality of the day outside. I missed the sunlight, even if it was tricky magic. And in the next moment, I was being hauled up the street to the apartment above the Mercantile.

"What the hell was that?" I asked as we mounted the steps in the fog.

"Not out here." Christina's voice was chopped, as if she struggled against panic.

There are no secrets on an island this small. What she thought to keep hidden was beyond me. Everyone who'd seen Sara Maarinen – old Kennewick, Grant Archerson, Gertie, the loungers at the White Rock – knew some version of the truth already. Words chased one another through my head in a sort of summoning: witchdaughters, bloodkin, mirror-twins, changelings. Children of the bone.

I thought of the Palka duty, the stained ax in its dank hole, and said nothing more.

We pushed into the apartment. It was a witchy enough place, of course, hung with travel posters of Bavarian castles and the Golden Gate Bridge, a shelf of chipped china horses along one wall, orchids struggling on the windowsill for sufficient sunlight. No purple silks or tinkling charms for Christina. Quiet magic.

But she was unquiet now. "What possessed you?"

"Possessed" is such an ugly term." She stiffened, and I wondered why we were fighting when by rights we should be plotting. "The salt failed, Christina. Then *she* took me in hand, demanded I let her in. I could not refuse her, any more than I can refuse you." *And for much the same reasons*, I did not add, before concluding, "Who is she to you?"

"No one." Christina whirled away from me, striding across her cracked floorboards like an army on the march. The Mercantile had closed when I was a small boy, but I imagined the drumming of her heels echoing among the shrouded shelves and dusty cobwebs down below. She turned back, tangled hair flying and eyes flashing.

All I could think was of the way her body bent like a storm-tossed sea as we made love, the same swirling hair, the same wild look on her face.

"No!" she shouted, for of course my own witch knew what was in my thoughts.

"Sara Maarinen called sunlight through the cottage windows," I said quietly, pitching my voice down to draw Christina from the perch of her anger, for of course her familiar knew her witchy

ways. "Driftglass off the ocean, melted and recast with the blood of gulls and gravedust in the forms." My voice had the cadence of lessoning, for such I recited. "Frames made from shipwreck wood. Those windows are *mirrors* that reflect power. She is the Bone Island witch come again."

Christina looked stricken. "No..."

"And she is your sister." I already knew the color of Sara Maarinen's nipples, the flavor of her as I set my mouth between her thighs, for she would be like Christina in all things save the nature of her power. Noisy magic and quiet magic, two halves of the same shell, split to be parceled lest they unite too great.

I wondered exactly what it was that the Palka ax had been meant to split.

Christina advanced on me, rage still in her eyes. Her hands trembled as she lifted them toward me. I don't know if she meant to strike me down or seize me for another sacrifice, but instead she pulled me into a rib-jarring embrace.

Her breath was warm in my ear, and my body surged as it always did to the scent of her. "She was never meant to be here, Cary. I am afraid."

I held my witch as she cried a while, something she had never done in my memory, and wondered on what my place in all this would be.

Here on Bone Island we have recipes for many things we never make. Literal recipes, in some cases. Most children over the age of six know how to prepare kraken stew, despite the fact that no kraken has been seen here or anywhere else since time out of legend. Likewise mermaid sausage, which had always struck me as a delightfully perverse idea.

So it was with the witch's cottage. There was only one cottage, and it survived despite a lack of maintenance or improvement, unitary and needing of no replacement. But still many of us knew how to measure a foundation course for a new witch's cottage, and what (or whom) to bury beneath the hearthstone, and how the windowglass should be cast, and the facing of the doors.

I'd long thought such knowledge must have uses beyond winter tale telling and providing fodder for the seaside games of children. Even when I was little, it intrigued me to comprehend the proper use of goat entrails. Mainland children were not so lucky, I knew, removed from the purpose of their rituals so that a charm against the plague was nothing more than a dancing game.

On Bone Island, when we said a charm against the plague, we knew damned well what the ring around the rosie was.

But we didn't have the plague. And we only had one witch, who died when I was still quite young, and who had never sought her own replacement. It was like the failing of a line of queens, now succeeded by the minor nobility like Christina.

Except Sara Maarinen was a princess. And if she was a princess, so was Christina. And *that* meant that there were secrets on this island, secrets which no one had ever let me into, at the least.

Christina sat in the old wicker rocker, dribbling salt into her claret, then drinking it anyway as a patch of struggling sunlight advanced across the floor at her feet. I watched her a while, and began to feel a mighty need to go talk to Grandfather. He'd not spared a word for me since I'd taken up with Christina, even when we'd crossed paths, he on his way to the Moravian Church

of a Saturday night and me on mine back to the pub.

But now I needed him. The duty needed me.

The thought came unbidden to my mind: A hive can have only one queen.

I found my greatcoat, tucked a few necessary things in the pocket, draped a shawl over Christina's shivering shoulders, then let myself out. The river of her power was but a seep now, as she journeyed through some country of imagination and regret.

It was time for me to seek the past as well.

'Duty' is an unlovely term. It implies a burden, a chore, something laid upon one's unwilling shoulders. Duty doesn't sound pretty, but more like a soiling of something best left clean. Onerous and filthy.

I want to say that the Palka duty belies its name, but I've told enough untruths in my life, and I shan't be lying any longer. This tale is my first solemn attempt at honesty – everything honest and needful, that is, not the sweet half-truths that island girls and tourists alike are pleased to hear, after the ale has run freely for a few hours and the music has started up once more.

As I walked up the main street for the fourth time this day, I passed the pub, heard the laughter inside, and was sore tempted. The sun – well, no, don't let me lie again. The sun I hadn't seen much of these many months, beyond the witch's false-playing cottage window. The daylight, let me say instead, was beginning to fade, as in warmer climes the sun slips beyond the horizon and good honest folks gather their children home and prepare the evening meal.

I wanted an ale, or stronger drink. And I wanted it badly. My feet drew themselves of their own accord back to the doorway so resolutely passed a moment ago. I could smell the beer, and Archerson's honeysuckle wine, and the straw on the floor, and even a bit of manure tramped in on someone's careless boot heel. My hand was raised to the handle. It was warm in there, and heads would turn as I entered, faces would open in greeting, sweet bottoms would scoot over on benches to make room for me. I could see it all. I heard Janey Iverson's sweet laughter, and my hand gripped the doorknob.

I dropped it and turned away abruptly, closing my eyes against my inner vision. No more lies also meant no more delays, no more avoiding my task. My burden.

My duty.

The road turned at the edge of the main street and climbed a little rise, where it then dwindled to a path that skulked drunkard through the windward trees. Bent and miserly, these poor remnants of someone's foolish idea about greening up the place still held their own against the howling sea wind, though they creaked and groaned with the effort, and dropped ice water down the back of my greatcoat. At least they kept the worst of the wind off the leeward farms, Grandfather's included.

Poor things.

The Palka would keep his place out here, though, and I would have to seek him out at his own hearth. That much I understood.

The last few trees were huddled together, as if to prevent one another from flying off the island altogether. The path narrowed, so I had to turn sideways to squeeze between them. Every time I did this, I wondered how stout Gertie managed, when she came

for Grandfather's washing and other weekly necessities.

And then I was through, and Grandfather's ancient house stood before me, vanishing into the mist and reappearing like an uneasy ghost.

It struck me in that moment how much he was like the Bone Island Witch. An old woman, alone but not lonely, unfriendly but not friendless, living in a building which seemed to be endlessly recreated without ever coming down or being built back up again.

But where her cottage had an air of ancient spells about it, screaming "magic" like a set right out of some Hollywood location scout's fever dream, Grandfather's screamed "farm". The toolsheds, the rusting plows inverted like broken riflestocks over soldiers' graves, the ancient cart overgrown with brambles, the goat pens, the straggling orchards along the lee of the chalk-white spinal ridge which erupted from the thin soil just to the east of the steading.

It was a farm which grew nothing but small boys fed on duty, tended and harvested by the old men they would become.

This was the one entrance on Bone Island I would never have to rap my knuckles against. Grandfather might have adopted a silent, passionless disdain for me, but I was still family. The only family left without a tiny little flower farm six feet above their heads.

My fingers stopped gently against the grain of the door. These planks had been rough sawn from driftwood, smoothed down by generations of wind, rain and callused hands. Beneath my touch was the quietest magic of all, earth and plow and family. That magic had left its veneer like a water stain.

Family, did it all come down to that?

I walked inside.

"Grandfather?"

The great room – for this was a real farmhouse – smelled of old ashes and stale tea. Comfortable furniture bulked unused as it had in the years since the last of the Palka women died, shadows of a merrier past with four feet and faded upholstery. There was no fire set, only a cold, burned down log. The long table which had once seated a dozen had a meal set, abandoned now.

Grandfather never walked away from a mess.

On the edge of panic, I whirled. His sweater and boots were not in their accustomed place by the door.

He had walked out, then. In an unaccountable hurry to leave the fire unkind and a dirty plate on the table. I checked. The eggs were old, at least a day.

Where?

But I already knew where.

Back outside into the howling fog, up through the struggling orchard, and along the oldest path this island boasted.

'Palka' meant priest. Our duty was only memory now, but Grandfather was surely at prayer, remembering whatever it was the ancient ax whispered to him in the long, dark winter nights that filled this island's soul like matted cobwebs.

That's what I told myself, anyway, hoping against hope that there was nothing darker afoot. The bag of salt back in my greatcoat pocket loomed large in my imagination. A day ago, Sara Maarinen was landing on Bone Island. A day ago, Grandfather saw or heard or felt something which made him push back from his eggs and walk away.

A day ago, I was coming to understand, my world had ended, and whatever had been made in its place was unknown to me. Truth, painful and incomplete, but far better than a lie over beer and sausages with a girl pressing up against each arm.

My feet were heavy within my boots as I made my way to the hawthorn-choked ravine, and the cave within. Every step took me closer to the end – my doom and my duty both. And what would come after? Somehow, I always thought I'd have more time.

I heard Grandfather before I saw him. His words were strange to my ears. At first I thought he was speaking some ancient tongue, a long-forgotten language of our forebears on the island. Then I heard chanting – could it be? It made no sense. Grandfather's prayers were ever the most basic, plain-spoken. From his mouth to God's ear, and no messing around with pretty poetry.

Only when I stepped through the dim light leaking from the mouth of the cave did I see him, and realize that he was laughing. It was a bitter, defeated laugh, filled with the pain of centuries, handed down from Palka to Palka, stored in the freshly-bloodied ax.

"Grandfather!" I rushed to him where he was crouched on the floor, cradling the ax as if it were a stillborn infant.

The Palka continued with the terrible sound, heedless of me by his side, shaking his head as the unholy mirth poured from him. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, streaming salty down his wrinkled face. He clung to the ax, even as the blood oozed from its sharp blade, staining his dungarees and pooling on the floor of the cave.

"What happened?" I shook his arm, hard. Anything to get him to stop the awful, mad laughter.

He finally noticed me, turning a bleary blue eye to my face. He was far past reason, but he saw me all the same.

"It's too late." Grandfather rocked back and forth on the floor, the ax shifting in his grasp. I wondered if the blood was his, hoping against hope that I wasn't seeing the end of him, that this was all a bizarre mistake.

"Too late for what?" I asked, though I knew full well. But he had to say it. He had to be the one to finish passing the duty on to me, end my youth with a sharp-edged whimper.

He had to be the one to hand me the blooded ax.

As for everyone else who might have played a part this day – well, their restless bones already danced beneath the soil.

"You must..." He stared at me. Tears poured, sweat beaded on his forehead, though it was well near freezing in the dank cave. "You must..." He couldn't bring himself to say it.

Instead, he held the ax out to me.

Hands trembled as someone I used to be reached out for the time-worn haft, polished by generations of bitter, callused palms. That person stood in the half-light of the cave, surrounded by the press of pale bone-rock, breath flooded with the meaty, sharp scent of blood which had run from nowhere to nowhere, stopping here along the way to pool at his feet. Dust motes spiraled in the damp wind eddying from outside, each individual speck of white gleaming fairy-bright as it danced its moment in the foggy glare from without, like the souls of men rising up from a ship's shattered bones.

That person's shoulder ached, where a witch had pressed him

too close. That person's back twitched, from walking before another witch so dangerous and angry. That person's fingers closed on the wooden handle, gripping despite the blood and the walnut-wrinkled knuckles of another, older person still caught in the spell of the duty.

Spell it was, woven around an ancient blade forged and re-forged just as soil, air and water become grain which becomes a cow which becomes beef which becomes a man which becomes shit which becomes soil, air and water once more. Never changing, ever different, the truth hidden in half a dozen forms but always the same.

Open any grave and you will find worms. Open any skull and you will find demons. Touch this ax, person who I used to be, and you will find –

Inside every girl born are all the children she will ever carry. A female infant has ovaries, tiny and poorly developed, but they are there, and filled with eggs. So it is with the world as a whole, each potential future encysted within the shapes and bounds of the present. Just as the eggs flow from a woman on a river of blood, so do the futures flow from the world on a river of blood.

Once wasp-minded people of modest stature lived beneath the hollow hills behind giant doors of stone, worshipping a copper-crowned woman and gods so old and strange that the stories retold around midsummer fires could not help but come out twisted as a witch's soup ladle.

Once people who went below with them to drink their mead and lie with their women did not come back until their children's children slept beneath the churchyard soil, and people called them elfshot and sleep-woken and bound them over to the sea for the coldest judgment.

Once the world voiced magic on the very wind, and the changing of the leaves foretold the patterns of the winter snow and where the wolf would hunt by the bitter moon.

Once a girl was born, her parentage irrelevant to her fate, in that the oldest doors slipped a crack so that spiders scuttled out, bearing among their number a bodiless shadow which roamed this forlorn relic of creation until it found that girl, and using a magic known only to those who bore swords of thorn and shields of beaten copper, split her from herself.

The ax told me these things, and many more secrets besides, when it remade me between one breath and the next there in the cave above my sobbing Grandfather. I reached down to stroke the blood from his eyes, and dropped my greatcoat over him to shelter him against the chillier fog of evening which can lay a glissade of ice over everything in its path, then I turned once more into the last of the day.

Only one thing the ax had failed to tell me: how a blade might unite what had so long ago been torn asunder.

Only one thing the ax had lied to me about: parentage is never irrelevant to fate.

Walking like an older man, I passed the footprints of a callow, careless youth along the orchard path leading back to my farm. A person whistled tunelessly, swinging a bloody ax to gauge its heft, though neither he nor I expected to use it as a weapon in that most obvious of ways, even at this late moment. Naïve? Perhaps. Even so, on we went.

If tiny shapes buzzed through the fog along my progress, I did

not take note of them. Some things it is best not to see until you have the power to loose and to bind them.

I was back on the main street before I knew I had passed through the whispering, weeping trees that hugged the path. My mind touched lightly on my body, holding it only enough to guide my boots where they needed to go. I came back to myself on the stone steps of the cottage. My knuckles were already rapping on the door, the ax held firm in my grip.

The door flew open, though by no one's living hand. Sara Maarinen and my Christina stood at the far end of the small room. They faced each other, a pace apart, locked in some terrible binding of fear and hatred and power and...love?

Neither head turned; they kept staring into each other's eyes. Damp air filled the cottage even as the power crackled between them. It grabbed me in its salty embrace, pawed through my heart and mind and soul, gripped my manhood, squeezed my guts till they threatened to explode.

I stood there. I held the ax.

A sound came from the two witchlings, high and keening, a whine or song or scream, echoing through the small room. My head pounded with it, and my own voice joined theirs, against my will – leaping from my lungs unbidden, uncontrollable.

I lifted the ax. I held it high, and pointed its sharp edge at the space between Sara and Christina.

My shoulder throbbed, and my arms almost threw the ax down, but I held it steady.

Sara Maarinen broke the gaze first. She turned a face of death to me, her mouth twisted into an ugly, grinning rictus. Released, Christina fell to the floor, her eyes rolling back in her head.

"Cary Palka," Sara said, in an entirely normal voice. "Put that silly thing down and come here." She reached out her arms as if to embrace me.

"No," I said, even as I lowered the ax. My right foot moved a step forward. The wound in my shoulder turned and twisted, beyond pain – it was as if a sharp spiny creature had found a home in there, but was now threatening to decamp, erupting right through my skin. I moaned, and my left foot joined my right. "No!"

Christina lay unconscious on the floor. One leg splayed out toward the middle of the room, where it was touched by a ray of sunlight from the impossible window.

I had to get her out of that light. I knew it – I didn't know why, or how, but that light could not continue to touch her. It was the key, even more than my ax.

I took another step forward, this time towards Christina. But that was also towards Sara.

"Excellent," Sara Maarinen said. Her death-mask smile widened. The keening howl had not stopped, though none of our voices were adding to it. It whipped through the room. I blinked my eyes, wanting to stop up my ears, but I could not loose my grip on the ax.

Another step.

Sara raised her arms higher, reaching to me, pulling me further in even as she took a step backwards. Away? No – she was moving to the tidy bed. The bed that was bathed in the same sunlight that was stealing Christina's soul away, bit by bit.

"That's right, come to me." Now Sara's voice was soft and

crooning, but it froze my heart all the same. And yet to her I went. I could do no less than to obey. Her blood had the owning of mine, as it always had.

My unwilling body eased into her arms as she leaned back, taking us both onto the narrow bed in a terrible parody of lovers. I still held the ax, making me slow and awkward. Sara pushed at my arm, still grinning, trying to nudge the bloody thing aside. She wouldn't put her thin hands on it. "Come, sweet, put that down and touch me. Touch me everywhere."

My fingers would not let go, though my mind screamed out to do as she bid. She was danger, and magic, and desire, and fear all at once. The sunlight was warm on my back, and it made the blood sparkle and glow.

Sara pushed my arm again, as she leaned up and kissed my face, the hollow of my throat, just as Christina did.

Christina!

I moaned, low and soft, as I tried to turn my head to see my witch. Sara took my face between her hands and brought it back to her mouth, kissing me hard. My lips opened to hers as I let her in, let her taste my essence, my echoing traces of whatever magic I possessed that had made Christina seek me out in the first place. Sara ate it up, writhing and rolling beneath me.

I grew hard, wanting her, even as I was desperate to flee. My body, no longer unwilling, played traitor to me, craving something far greater than it should have to endure.

My fingers loosened on the ax, just a bit. I gripped it again, swallowing a curse, and struggled anew to pull away from Sara Maarinen.

She wrapped strong legs around mine and dragged my hips down, matching my groin to hers. Fully dressed we were, but intertwined more intimately than most lovers ever achieve, as she enticed every bit of my will and soul out through my mouth and breath and pores and into her hungry body.

"You are mine," she whispered, then set her mouth to mine once more.

I felt both drained and invigorated by her touch, her kiss. The ax slipped an inch as my fingers sought to travel familiar pathways, the landscape of Christina's body, Sara's body... I grabbed it tighter once more. I would not let go of it, I would not! All would be lost.

Sara twisted and purred underneath me, inflaming me further. Her movements brought us both out of the sun for a moment. The icy air on my back was a tonic; in the moment of clarity, I heard Grandfather's quavering voice: "The Duty! Do it!"

Sara hissed as I pulled away from her, stronger this time. My knuckles were white where I held the ax. I staggered to my feet and danced away from Sara's claw-like hands. "No!" she screamed.

On the floor at my feet, Christina stirred. I could feel her weakness, her loss of power. I reached down with my free hand and moved her leg out of the sunlight, then was forced to jump back as Sara leapt for me.

Everyone was screaming, though none of us were. What was that sound? My ears rung from it. I darted away from Sara, but she was fast, and came for me again.

Then I saw the diadem, and I knew.

I fended Sara off once more, stepped around Christina's prone body, and raised the dripping ax high over my head.

Grandfather, why did you do this? He had nailed the awful thing there in the first place, all those years back. He had thought that would put paid to it, to its terrible magic: fastening it to this dead cottage amid the tall weeds and dancing bones. No such luck.

Sara saw what I was doing, and the shrill wailing grew even louder. "No!" she shouted, over the din.

I brought the ax down hard, meaning to smash the awful object in two. The blade bounced off it, sending droplets of blood flying. Some fell on Christina, who moaned and stirred again. I could smell the blood burning into her sweet flesh, where her leg was exposed.

I raised the ax and smashed again. Once more, the diadem resisted both the force of the magic and my own youthful strength, but I did knock it from the wall. It fell clanging to the floor, then rolled across the room, coming to a stop at the front door.

Sara lunged for it, but stopped short.

In the open doorway stood a tiny child, Janey Iverson's poppet, not quite two years old, and of indeterminate parentage, as they say. Not mine, I was pretty sure. She was an adorable thing, saucer-wide blue eyes framed by a halo of wild golden curls, and cheeks so fat and rosy even a ruined witch's familiar like me couldn't resist pinching them.

Little Laureen picked up the diadem and placed it atop those curls.

Sara screamed. Christina awoke and joined her witchsister in screaming.

I stared at the child.

Janey appeared behind her, snatching the youngling up and hefting her into strong mother's arms. "There you are! You gave me an awful fright!" Without a glance inside the cottage, she marched down the front path and back into the street.

Laureen stared solemnly back at me, clutching at her mother's plump shoulder. I watched those unblinking blue eyes and thought, *She does look like me.*

I realized something more, too, in that moment, though I didn't want to admit of it. There was more wisdom, more magic in that two-year-old face than in any witch, foreign-born or locally grown.

A sound brought me back to myself – or, rather, the absence of sound. The high wailing, keening noise had vanished with the diadem on the poppet's head. I turned around to face Sara and Christina, to finish what I had started.

The cottage was empty.

I let the air slide out of my lungs as I leaned against the front wall. They were both gone, as if they'd never been there in the first place. The only evidence that anyone had passed through the room was the mussed bed, and the splintered hole in the back wall where I'd hacked away the diadem. Even the sunlight window was shadow-dark.

That's when I realized the ax was gone as well. Even the droplets of blood had vanished.

I ran to the tangled yard, shouting, "Christina! Christina!" After a bit of wild flailing, I called for Sara as well. But they were both gone, and a part of me knew it. Knew it the moment the terrible artifact had touched those golden curls.

I stumbled on something in the weeds and fell to the ground. Something hard, jutting out of the soil. I reached back for it – a stick, a rock? My fingers found it and pulled. It was a bone, thick

and ancient.

Cursing, I dropped it and scrambled to my feet, but my boots found another bone at once. They were pushing outward from the very ground, rising to the surface! The whole yard was filled with them – and beyond the yard, all the way down the slope to the beach.

And here was the blood, all the blood that had vanished from the cottage, and then some – gallons, tubs of blood, running in thick rivulets down the sand, pouring into the boiling bight, crashing back against the shore in pink foamy bubbles, then rolling out again. Blood, muddying the sand, dripping from the trees, spattering my shirt and hands and face. Fat wasps with the faces of raddled women flew amid the droplets, shrieking curses in the language of stock and stone. Two women fought on the beach, barely visible in the blood and fog, alike as twins, familiar as lovers.

Crows screamed overhead, and I answered them, running wildly. I needed to retrieve my ax. I hadn't fulfilled the duty.

"You have," came a quiet voice at the back of my mind. Grandfather? But no one was there. I stopped my wild running and clung to the trunk of a tree, letting the blood pour over me, sink into the sand, slip into the sea.

"You have," I heard again.

A heavy rain started just then, as if the fog-laden clouds had finally given up their burden, all at once.

I fell to my knees, put my face in my hands, and wept.

"Damned peculiar weather we're having," Grant Archerson remarked to the room at large. He let his eyes rest on me a moment longer than necessary. "Damned peculiar."

Sunlight streamed in through the filthy windowpanes of the Tossed Pot, highlighting the thick layers of dust that rested everywhere on the kitschy decor. No sense tidying up, when the light was always so gloomy, Grant always maintained. Except for three days now, the golden sun had blessed Bone Island with its sweet charms, bringing housewives out to sweep their porches, an extra boatload of tourists from the mainland, and a foul temper from Grant.

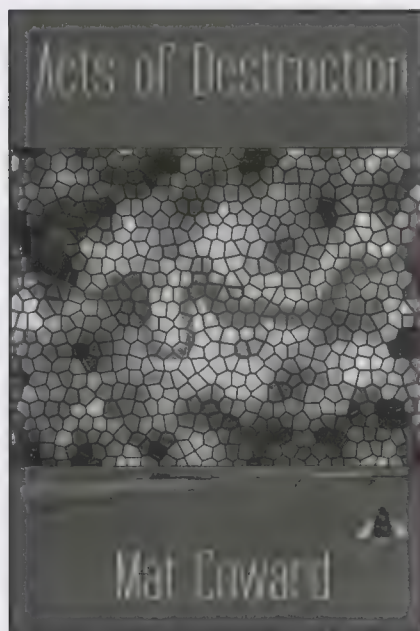
No one had mentioned Sara Maarinen. It was as if she had never existed. Christina...well, her presence was everywhere, like a friend half-seen passing a street corner at night. I imagined the ax, bloody and snug in a chalky grave between two women twined tight as any sacrifice at the foot of a standing stone. Noisy magic and quiet magic, united once more. Had the entirety of Bone Island become the witch's window?

No matter. Sunlight would pass, and people went about their business of living no matter who was bleeding in the alley. I shrugged and rested a hand on Janey Iverson's knee. "Might have to buy a short-sleeved shirt if this keeps up."

Laureen played at our feet, the diadem still nestled in her curls. Something flashed in the child's bright blue eyes from time to time, then passed again like clouds before the sun. There was a witch line, and a line of keepers. Always had been. Always would be. Who was to say they couldn't be the same line?

Janey, who was cousin to Christina's mother, smiled at me and laid her head on my shoulder. "Can't get her to take that silly thing off, even for bed," she murmured.

I just nodded, then looked to Grant. "Another ale?" ■



ACTS OF DESTRUCTION

Mat Coward

Alia Mondo Press, 264pp, £10 pb

Reviewed by Peter Loftus

Acts of Destruction is set in a near future London that readers will find both comfortingly familiar and yet utterly different from the one we know today. Major social, economic and political changes (known collectively as 'The Process') have occurred, resulting in a Britain that has been transformed at a fundamental level. Petrol shortages mean that most transport is horse-drawn or involves good old-fashioned legwork. Wastefulness is unpatriotic, and recycling is a serious business. The country is almost entirely self-sufficient, with rationing in place and food production back in the hands of the people.

Several loosely interlinked story arcs follow the busy lives of the detectives of the North London Serious Crime Squad as they go about the business of keeping the city safe from criminals and those opposed to The Process. Apart from a case of illegal dumping and a spate of vegetable thefts, two bodies have been unearthed in a strangely deserted suburban dwelling and the worst is feared when a child is reported missing.

One of the most striking things about *Acts of Destruction* is how the detectives of the NLSCS go about their business. They drink tea with potential suspects. They go down to the local for pints and mutton sandwiches. They eat cake. They drink tea again. There are no rooftop chases,

back alley shootouts or midnight raids. Villains come along quietly. But none of this is a problem. The easy-going, laid-back approach of the detectives perfectly mirrors the feel of the narrative and the tone of Coward's post-Process Britain. Nothing is forced or rushed.

The various detectives in the novel are eminently likeable and serve as suitable companions on our journey along the different story arcs. Ultimately however, The Process is the star of the show, proffering a socialist future where community has been re-established and human endeavour serves the populace rather than the demands of business and parliament. People live, work and socialise in their own neighbourhood, taking responsibility for the division of labour and the allocation of resources. This is a world where neighbours know each other, traffic jams are a thing of the past and a pint and pipe await at the end of a day spent on the allotment.

The construct of *The Process* works exceptionally well as a lens through which to examine the world we live in today. While not quite a blueprint for a better tomorrow, it does offer a timely plea for sanity, presenting Coward's argument in a manner that is thought-provoking, entertaining and stimulating. Although it was intended to be neither Utopian nor Dystopian in nature, post-Process Britain will likely prove more compelling and indeed attractive than any fictional future in recent years, whatever your politics.

As a police procedural, *Acts of Destruction* is a qualified success. All of the threads are tied together neatly and precisely, with a satisfying resolution to each of the story arcs. However, because Coward digresses into social commentary so regularly (and why not, if that is the point of the book?) there is a certain lack of dramatic tension.

For a less accomplished writer, this could prove a problem, but Coward's light touch offsets any deficiency, meaning that even when the action does flag, *Acts of Destruction* remains hugely readable and enjoyable. It even achieves the neat trick of being humorous *and* whimsical without turning into a farce or pantomime.

It is as a social commentary that *Acts of Destruction* is at its most effective, with post-Process Britain serving as an ideal measure against which to examine modern life.

When Coward's characters exclaim incredulously about a time when people *actually* worked in sales and computers were used for *everything*, one can't help but think they may have a point.

THE GIFT OF JOY

Ian Whates

Newcon Press, 252pp, £18.99 hb/£9.99 pb

Reviewed by Mike Cobby

As *outré* as it is to quote Kipling these days, he did remark that there are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays and every single one of them is right.

So it is in SF, and one of the reliable methods is to take the world as it is – and change just one thing, then write the story and let the consequences fall where they may.

Ian Whates is pretty good at that, although such a methodology is not the only string to his bow. His collection, *The Gift of Joy*, showcases eighteen short stories which range from the dystopia of 'Ghost in the Machine' to the urban grit of 'Knowing How to Look', from the cunning lull of 'A Hint of Mystery' to the interstellar enigma of 'The Battle For Paradise'.

Whates writes with a distinctly English flavour (I speak as a Scot) without adopting the languid pace of elegaic home counties

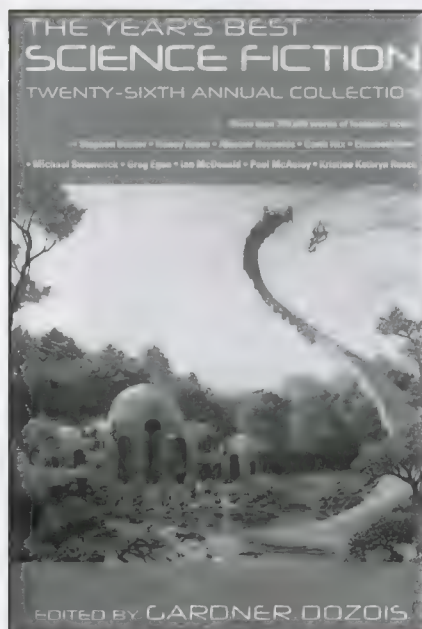
<<He's a dab hand at endings, twist endings in which the final words reveal, like the turn of the cards, an unexpected meaning or resolution>>

SF. Like in 'Gossamer', where the narrator relates his acquaintance with an older writer friend and his cottage buried in the enigmatic, wooded landscape of rural middle England, a cottage with an otherworldly connection: "It was as if Summer Cottage were some forgotten remnant of another age, a corner of faery that had been overlooked and left behind by the fey-folk when they abandoned us to our own devices."

And he's a dab hand at endings, twist endings in which the final words reveal, like the turn of the cards, an unexpected meaning or resolution.

There is a thread of loss that runs through many of the stories, but also a reaction to it, a kind of positive, upbeat approach to endings. It is his characters who live through the stories and make the reader need to know just how it's all going to pan out, human characters who may seem familiar but then there's that one thing, that shifted alteration that changes the world and changes the reader too.

A collection definitely worth reading. Recommended.



THE YEAR'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: TWENTY-SIXTH ANNUAL COLLECTION

Gardner Dozois

St Martin's Griffin, 639pp, \$21.95 pb

published in the UK as:

THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF NEW SF 22

Robinson 724pp, £9.99 pb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

After twenty-six years, Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction* is not so much an anthology as an institution. Solid, reliable, it arrives punctually every year, offering over quarter of a million words of short story as well as Dozois's summary of the year's activities in science fiction publishing. Its arrival used to be a major event for me and I doubt I was the only one who used Dozois's selections as a pointer for further reading. If Dozois's word was not law precisely, his undeniable good taste in stories surely prompted readers to take a few risks in what they tackled.

Times change: there are now various annual 'best of' anthologies available, with each editor having his or her own take on what constitutes 'best' and, for that matter, what constitutes 'science fiction'. For all the endless rehashing of the genre wars, not to mention what should and shouldn't be part of the 'canon', that the sf 'church' is now such a broad one is in no small part thanks to Dozois's generous promotion of the likes of Gene Wolfe, Joanna Russ and many others. So where does that leave his own *Year's Best* anthology? Does

anything, apart from its size and publishing longevity, continue to set this anthology apart? Looking at this year's volume, it is a surprisingly difficult question to answer.

Not least on the agenda is what makes these thirty stories 'best'? Nancy Kress's 'The Erdmann Nexus' won the 2009 Hugo for Best Novella, but Elizabeth Bear, winner of the Best Novelette Award, is represented by a story co-authored with Sarah Monette, while Ted Chiang, winner of the Best Short Story, is not represented at all. On the other hand, a number of the Hugo-shortlisted stories do appear in this collection. Pick another award: how about the Nebulas? There's very little correspondence between those shortlists and this anthology's contents. Then again, there is very little correspondence between the Hugo and Nebula shortlists, period. I could slice and dice award shortlists all day long, but the fact remains that these are the stories Dozois considers to be the best he saw during 2008.

What strikes me is that they are mostly as solid and reliable as the anthology's reputation. There are no bad stories here, but by the same token, there are few if any that actually excite me. Take Kress's 'The Erdmann Nexus': this is a well-constructed story, as one would expect, with a neat idea at its heart. I like the fact that she engages with what it means to grow old and that her elderly characters are passionate, mindful, valuable people. Yet this story is just a little too long, teetering on the brink of sentimentality, and that's typical of a number of stories here, from Maureen McHugh's 'Special Economics' to Daryl Gregory's 'The Illustrated Biography of Lord Grimm'. As one begins reading, there is the sense of being pleasantly enveloped by the promise of a feel-good ending without being truly nourished on the way. By contrast, Ian McDonald's 'An Eligible Boy', set in his future India, while it initially promises something similar, cheerfully wreaks havoc with the reader's expectations. His other story included here, 'The Tear', although very different, is similarly rich in invention.

Invention, novelty (as in new rather than gimcrack): these are qualities which do seem to be lacking in this selection. I am mystified, for example, as to why Charles Coleman Finlay's 'The Political Prisoner' seems to have attracted so much attention in the last year. It's a study of wrongful imprisonment and endurance of the system, but it feels old and tired as a narrative conceit. And truly, I did not

expect to see yet another alternate history featuring a Kennedy brother, but Kristine Kathryn Rusch's 'G-Men' delivers just that. The 'alternate history' is little more than a convenient hook on which to hang a thin story of the murder of J. Edgar Hoover.

Gord Sellars's 'Lester Young and the Jupiter's Moons' Blues' is a cleverer and wittier alternate history, examining the fate of the jazzmen who travelled on the Frogships, and I enjoyed it for his knowing reworkings of familiar technology. However, it still feels a little too slick for its own good, and goes down a little too easily. Indeed, the same could be said of many stories in the collection, from Bear's and Monette's 'Boojum' to James L. Cambias's 'Balancing Accounts' with its robot ship making its way, earning its living. Where is the story that makes one want to rush out and buttonhole one's friends, saying 'read this'.

In truth, apart from the two by McDonald (who is anyway one of my favourite writers), there isn't a story that really excites me. Few that stick firmly in the memory, to re-emerge days later. The anthology feels autumnal, retrospective,

<<Does anything, apart from its size and publishing longevity, continue to set this anthology apart? It is a surprisingly difficult question to answer>>

conservative and cautious (it seems significant somehow that only one story is drawn from an online magazine, Jay Lake's wonderfully-titled 'The Sky That Wraps The World Round, Past The Blue And Into the Black', which first appeared in *Clarkesworld*, and which itself reflects on the past). The autumnal chill invades Dozois's summation of the year, which makes sobering reading as he charts the ups and downs, mostly downs, of the sf industry. And perhaps that's what this anthology is all about: Dozois's response to recession, fuelling a desire for stories in which good always triumphs in the best possible way. As usual, Dozois's generous spirit is shown to best advantage at the end of the collection, with eleven pages of 'Honorable Mentions', the Carrollian moment when everyone gets a prize. I've seen him mocked in the past for doing it, but it remains a big deal for a writer to be noticed, and part of what Dozois's *Year's Best* has always been about is noticing. I may disagree profoundly with him about the story selection this year, but he remains our witness to the ebb and flow of the genre and of the industry.

TRANSITION

Iain Banks

Little Brown, 416pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

When a book that proclaims itself 'based on a false story' begins: 'Apparently I am what is known as an Unreliable Narrator, though of course if you believe everything you're told you deserve whatever you get,' you know that the author is playing games. But to what end?

The signs are contradictory. In the UK this novel is published as by Iain Banks, the form of the name he uses for his mainstream novels; in the USA it is published as by Iain M. Banks, the form of the name he uses for his science fiction. Yet this is a novel that is undeniably science fiction, replete with fantastic invention and soaring visions of multiple realities. In the prologue our unnamed narrator (it soon becomes apparent which of several characters this is) carefully explains that the action occurs between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the World Trade Centre; yet the majority of the novel is set within worlds in which neither of these events happened. The prologue then lays out six very different scenarios, each of which, we are told, is how the story begins; yet most of these, when they recur within the body of the novel, come in the middle of the story or even later, one is actually part of the ending.

And if the knowing structural games aren't confusing enough, the novel's moral centre is even more bewildering. All of the leading characters, whether villains we are meant to boo or heroes we are meant to cheer, are mass murderers at the least (Banks hasn't written a book nearly as bloody as this since *Against a Dark Background*). The mildest of the leading characters is a professional torturer, happy at a moment's notice to regale us with the mechanics of his craft. The least violent of the main players in this drama is that cartoon villain of contemporary Western culture, an investment banker. He's a self-made man, arrogant, duplicitous, clawing his way to wealth without a thought for those he damages along the way; and he's one of the good guys. Selfishness, we are told in no uncertain terms, is good. Every so often Banks will stand back from all

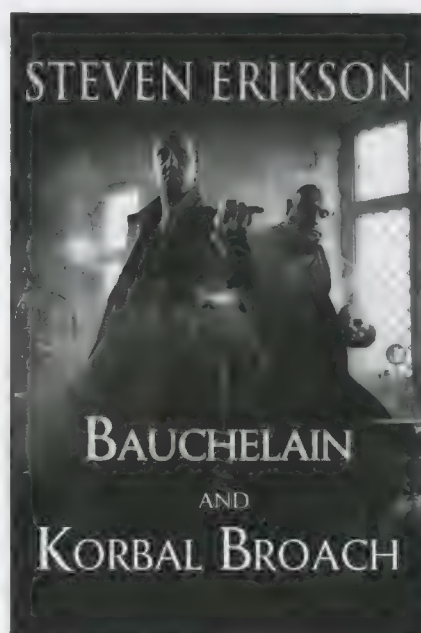
these murky deeds and shake his head, tut gently, explain that this is not a right way to be, and at the end he contrives suitably unpleasant endings for most though by no means all of the unpleasant characters. Yet one can't help feeling that what keeps the story going, what engages us, author and readers alike, is the nastiness. If Banks has carefully put in enough evidence to show his heart is in the right place, still the remorseless, recurring and detailed attention paid to corruption and cruelty is enough to leave a sour taste in the mouth at the end of the book.

The story itself, of course, is the sort of bravura exercise in vivid non-stop storytelling that Banks does so well. There are uncountable numbers of parallel worlds, some differing from their neighbours by no more than the placement of an atom, some extraordinarily varied. With the help of a drug, septus, some people have learned to transition between these worlds, and now, over the course of a thousand years, a vast organisation, the Concern, has grown up to variously police, control and manage the multiverse. But under Madame d'Ortolan, the Concern has become more malevolent; at least, so the renegade Mrs Mulverhill believes, and she recruits the transitioning assassin, Temudjin Oh, to her cause.

Along with these we also meet a range of other vivid characters, including a torturer known as The Philosopher, a City trader, and a nameless man hiding out in a mysterious hospital.

None of this makes much sense. Grandiose plans to use assassins like Oh to change the course of history in one reality or another are meaningless when we are repeatedly told that there is no way of seeing into the future, and anyway an unchanged reality is certain to exist somewhere. And the plot is so complex and involves so many characters that we draw perilously close to the end of the book with things still being set up and no resolution in sight. The climax, when it comes, is consequently rushed, schematic, and doesn't really seem to resolve anything.

Nevertheless, the whole thing is told with the sort of flash and flair that we have come to recognise from Banks. Don't question what is going on too closely and you'll be swept along on a light, fast, ridiculous but still entertaining extravaganza.



BAUCHELAIN AND KORBAL BROACH, THREE SHORT NOVELS OF THE MALAZAN EMPIRE

Steven Erikson

Tor, 316 pp, \$14.99 pb

Review by Duncan Lunan

Bauchelain and Korbal Broach contains three novellas set in the world of Steven Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series. The eponymous characters previously appeared in a novel, *Memories of Ice*; the first two novellas describe how they recruited their servant Emancipor Reese, 'Mancy the Luckless', while the third finds the trio on their travels four years later. It's really Reese's story that's being told, though the chapters are short and there are many shifts of viewpoint.

The settings of Lamentable Moll, Laughter's End and Quaint are portrayed in detail from those viewpoints, and vividly imagined – though it might be nice, for a change, to enter a fantasy world which had more in common with, say, Sweden or Switzerland. Even the citizens of Quaint manage to be health fanatics without focussing on cleanliness.

Bauchelain and Broach are sorcerers and shape-changers, and I didn't find them convincing, especially when they change into birds and small animals. In one of my own stories I argued that if a vampire changes into a bat it has to be a *big* bat, and similar points were made earlier by Douglas V. Duff (*The Man from Outer Space*) and Fritz Leiber (*The Swords of Lankhmar*). If body mass goes up or down,

it must come from or go somewhere. Bauchelain and Broach are pursuing agendas which are never explained, though Tor's covering letter with the review copy says, "Erikson's story about raising the dead can be compared to a modern day version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with Korbal Broach's eerie fascination with creating life" – resurrecting it, more precisely, but he lacks *Frankenstein*'s nobility. To paraphrase Kipling, Broach may speak with kings (dead ones, mostly), but he lacks the common touch which is required for greatness.

Broach's creation, which gets loose on a sailing ship in 'The Lees of Laughter's End', is an amalgam of human and animal body parts, reminiscent of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Synthetic Men of Mars*. It succumbs in all-night battle with a demon which bites through deck and bulkheads to consume the crew.

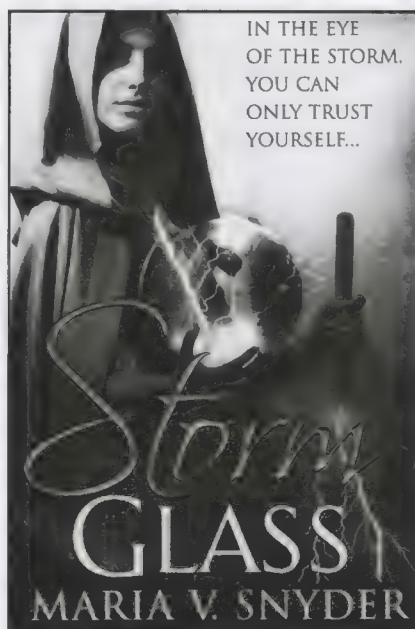
Towards the end, the ship is boarded by a third monster big enough to partly swamp it – yet our anti-heroes, the captain and many of the crew survive. Try to imagine that on, say, Drake's *Golden Hind*, which was only thirty feet long – and I don't believe that the *Suncurl*'s novice crew could handle a much larger vessel. To sail a ship the size of the *Victory* or the *Mary Rose* the crew had to be highly disciplined and work as a precision team.

At the end of this story, a pirate ship is bearing down on the wreck, anticipating little trouble. Clearly they're wrong, because the third novella begins on land four years later. There's no explanation for it, not even a Hope-and-Crosby style 'we could tell you, but you wouldn't believe it', which is jarring when the first two segments of the book are consecutive.

Tor's letter states that "Fans...who have not yet delved into Steven Erikson's spectacular *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series will not want to miss *Bauchelain and Korbal Broach*, which offers a perfect entry point for new readers."

So I tried *The Bonehunters* (Bantam, 2006), the sixth book in the series, and I found that the action was set in a different part of the planet, with entirely different characters and with a huge amount of backstory which gave me a big problem with accessibility, despite pages of maps and *Dramatis Personae* at the beginning and a Glossary at the end.

New readers would do better to start right at the beginning, or to read *Bauchelain and Korbal Broach* as a stand-alone work.



STORM GLASS

Maria V. Snyder

MIRA Books, 504pp, £6.99 pb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

Storm Glass is the first volume of a new fantasy trilogy by Maria Snyder. It is set in the same world as an earlier trilogy but some years later, and one of the minor characters from that series now takes centre stage.

Opal Cowan (the only known glass magician in Sitia) has to solve the problem of why the glass orbs used by the stormdancers to trap the energy of storms have started breaking with fatal results. She soon discovers that the orbs have been sabotaged. In the course of this investigation, she becomes involved in two other investigations, one into the smuggling of diamonds into Sitia, the other into the counterfeiting of diamonds. The former investigation proves to be tenuously connected with the people who have been sabotaging the stormdancers' orbs. As it happens, it is also tenuously connected with a plot to manipulate Opal into releasing one (or more) of the villains from the previous trilogy. Romantic interest is provided by Opal's relationships with Kade, one of the stormdancers, and Ulrick, a fellow glassmaker (and possibly another glass magician).

This novel will appeal primarily to those readers who like their fantasy action-packed. From the outset Snyder drives the plot forwards at a relentless pace. Not content with action-filled chapters, she

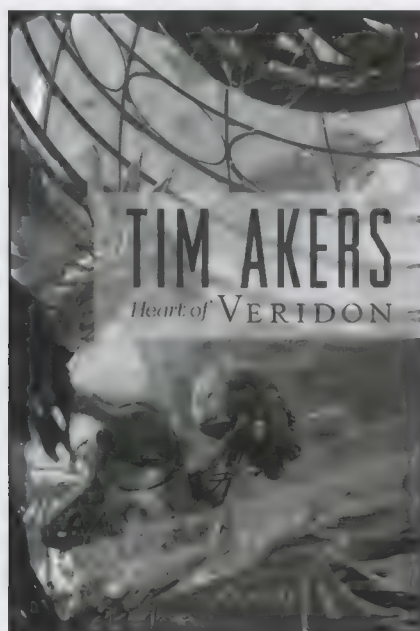
heightens tension by habitually splitting scenes across chapter boundaries. (This rapidly becomes irritating, particularly when conversations are split up in this way!)

But if the story is packed with action, the same cannot be said for characterization. Snyder makes matters difficult for herself by writing the entire novel from Opal's perspective. Of course, this means that it is essential for the reader to sympathise with Opal. Unfortunately she is a self-doubting, self-pitying, self-absorbed, whiny teenager. Since every other character is seen through this unflattering lens, it is hard for the author to make them more than stereotypes. To be fair to Snyder, she does have Opal embark on a process of self-discovery and growing honesty which may bear fruit in later volumes.

Perhaps I could forgive the weak characterization if the world-building were strong enough to compensate. Unfortunately I found the world Snyder has created as unconvincing as most of her characters. There are two nations in her world: Ixia, a former monarchy now run by a military dictatorship, and Sitia, a federation of autonomous clans overseen by a council whose membership is unclear and whose powers are not explained. Magic is an integral part of everyday life in Sitia but, since the revolution, has been forbidden in Ixia. Beyond that there is little to distinguish them, little or no sense of cultural diversity, no indication of ethnic diversity, no variation in language or even in names. Thus Opal can retain her own name but pass for an Ixian simply by donning an Ixian uniform.

Snyder's societies appear to be pre-industrial and largely agrarian. Animals are used for transport. Her towns appear to be primarily marketplaces (with some concentrations of craftsmen). Weaponry is resolutely pre-modern. And yet she refers vaguely to factories (driven by energy extracted magically from storms) though there is no indication of what they might produce and why such societies might require industrial production of anything.

Individually points like this seem trivial. But they add up to a level of inattention to world-building that made it impossible for me to suspend my disbelief long enough to become properly immersed in the story. However, if you are looking for an action-packed fantasy to while away a few hours and are not too concerned with characterization or the weaving of a convincing alternative world, you need look no further than *Storm Glass*.



HEART OF VERIDON

Tim Akers

Solaris, 473pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

Regular readers will be no strangers to Tim Akers or, indeed, to Veridon: Akers' biomechanical city has been the setting for two self-contained short stories that have appeared in these pages already, and now this vast construct moves, iceberg-like, through the narrative of his first novel. It's far too massive to be affected much by the doings of mere characters, and Akers has barely scratched the surface of its potential. The accidents of circumstance mean that Akers' Veridon also will automatically call to mind Jeff VanderMeer's equally baroque Ambergris (Verdigris, anyone?), and Akers, unfortunately, cannot quite match VanderMeer's well-crafted prose at this early stage in his career. This issue, however, is neatly sidestepped in *Heart of Veridon* by making it a first-person noir pastiche, which – these days – is more of a tradition than an authorial conceit. It might make for a shorter list if I were to name the writers who haven't dabbled rather than the other way around.

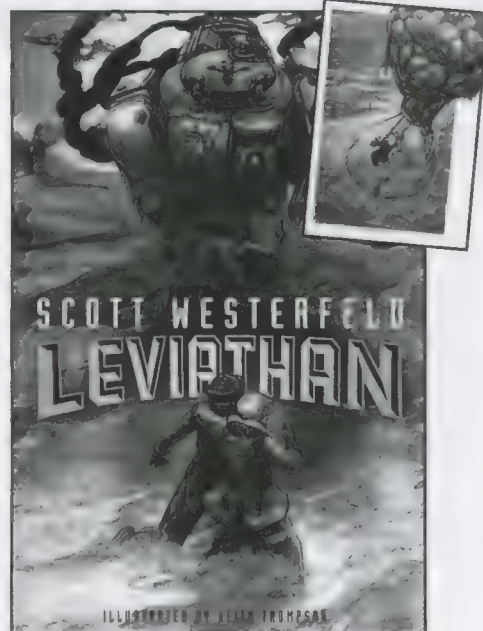
Anyway. The protagonist here is Jacob Burn, a rich kid gone bad who has already made an appearance in a Solaris anthology. Burn trained up as a zepliner pilot only to be struck off after a crash. He's still got the augmented eyes, though, but he is now happily living the low life when he runs across one of his old student colleagues whilst, once again, travelling

on a doomed zepliner (cheekily, they had studied together under Hammett). His friend hands him the McGuffin, which in this case turns out to be a complex cog, before expiring in the crash. Burn has to solve the mystery, not least because it seems like the best way of staying alive, and Akers vigorously marches him past the usual suspects: Emily (the tart with a heart); Angela (the glacial femme fatale); Wilson (the loyal sidekick); and so forth. Few are who they seem to be, and everyone is struggling under the burden of hidden agendas. The police force, known colloquially as Badgemen, happens to be satisfyingly thuggish and brutal, and there is also an implacable mechanical killing machine on Burn's trail (which is reminiscent, slightly too often, of its many Hollywood precursors). To divulge much more of the plot would be to betray the essence of a novel such as this. Plot is the driving force here.

Description, curiously, is not made into a great feature of this book. There is chapter after chapter of dialogue and confrontation, with violence, death and just enough dry wit scattered throughout to season the progression of Burn's unravelling of the conspiracy at the heart of it all, but occasionally the reader will wonder about the details of the sights that greet him. Akers will happily describe the things that strike Burn as unusual, but Burn's everyday occurrences flash past as being of no import, as, indeed, they shouldn't for the narrator. Akers, to his great credit, mostly succeeds, but now and again a single word will have one faltering. The Badgemen wear trenchcoats? But of course they do; throw out that steampunk image of them and press on with the story, reader.

Another curiosity is the native people, the arachnid-like ansasi, who form an almost invisible underclass. Wilson is one, but for narrative purposes needn't have been. It's a feature of several American fantasies and it doesn't take much to see where the germ comes from.

This novel has been pegged as the first in a trilogy although it stands handsomely enough on its own feet, which may be just as well given all of the problems that Solaris has faced recently. Akers, however, has made a heavy personal investment in Veridon and will doubtlessly be returning there in the future regardless of whatever publishing storms lash its walls. On the strength of this showing he will not be returning alone.



LEVIATHAN

Scott Westerfeld (& Keith Thompson)

Simon and Schuster, 440pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Cockburn

If the best science fiction usually examines present-day concerns through the refracting lens of an imagined future or distant world, what is there to say about the alternate pasts of steampunk and 'counterfactual'? Grounded in what often seems an overt nostalgia for a past that never was, is there anything more to such books than the glorification of wondrous machines and clever games of 'what if'?

Leviathan is the first book in a new trilogy by Scott Westerfeld, popular author of the young adult 'Uglies' series. Aimed (according to the publisher's press release) at 10–14 year olds, the novel follows the adventures of two teenagers in a Europe on the eve of the First World War. But it's not the Europe we know; nations with world-spanning empires may be about to topple into conflict because of various international alliances, but this is a world technologically quite different from our own 1914.

Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire are at the pinnacle of iron technology, having designed a host of armoured fighting machines that cross the land on multiple legs. In contrast, Great Britain has gone down an entirely different route thanks to Charles Darwin who, in this reality, not only theorised about evolution but went on to discover DNA and work out how to manipulate the 'life threads' to fabricate new beasts of burden that have

largely replaced traditional technology.

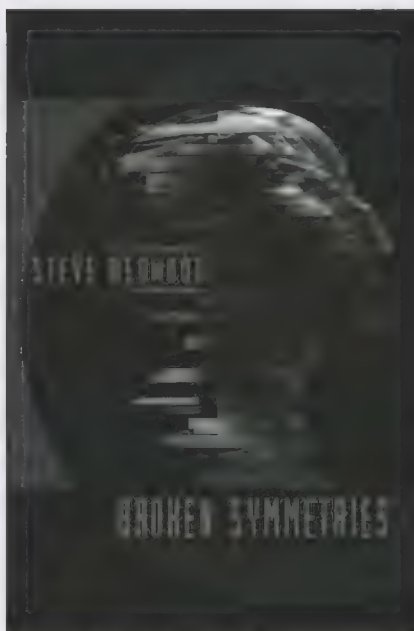
Just how different an early 20th century Britain really would have been with so many fabricated animals around is not, of course, something Westerfeld goes into too deeply. Given that airships have become the default means of indicating alternate/parallel timelines, Westerfeld at least is able to distinguish his alternate 1914 – when airships were, of course, actually part of our world. For the titular *Leviathan* isn't just an airship; it's a giant 'hydrogen breather', clearly based on a whale, but with its DNA manipulated to such an extent that it's now 'a vast web of life in ever shifting balance' which has been focused by human ingenuity on the tasks of generating lift and creating sufficiently destructive weapons of war.

Leviathan isn't just some symbolic battle between the forces of technology and biology; it is, first and foremost, a well-paced adventure story. The two main point of view characters are, like many of the book's intended readers, teenagers; they just happen to have found themselves suddenly in a world far more exciting and dangerous than they'd ever imagined. As with much children's/young adult fiction, both are also – effectively – orphans.

Alek is Prince Aleksander, would-be heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, on the run after the murder of his peace-loving parents – with only some trusted retainers to keep him from the Germanic alliance that would like to see him dead. Deryn Sharp is a brilliant, though under-aged, midshipman in the British Air Service, who lives in constant fear of being discovered to be a girl – this being 1914, she would be immediately thrown out of the nation's Armed Forces. When, after a serious battle with 'clanker' aircraft brings the damaged *Leviathan* down on a remote Alpine glacier, their two stories become entwined and they realise that – mutual suspicions notwithstanding – their only hope of survival is to join forces.

Westerfeld's prose is certainly tight and succinct, though it's disappointing that the book finishes so abruptly, leaving a real sense of the reader having been given only part of Alek's and Deryn's story for their money.

It's also fair to say that much of the detail of this world actually comes from the numerous monochrome illustrations by Keith Thompson, rather than Westerfeld's text. Carefully placed so as to accentuate, but not anticipate, the story, Thompson's detailed nevertheless 'sketches' ensure *Leviathan* exists in a distinct and clearly realised world.



BROKEN SYMMETRIES

Steve Redwood

Dog Horn Publishing, 274pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

In Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, the protagonist Kid meets with a poet, Ernest Newboy, who is visiting Bellona. During their conversation, the subject of books and writers crops up. Newboy explains how he had been a fan of a particular writer until he actually met him. After that, he could no longer read his writing – the 'voice' of the real life (so to speak) author overwhelmed that of the writing. Conversely, another whose writings he did not like, he found he appreciated a great deal more having met her in person. It's twaddle, of course. The voice of a novel or story is a construct; it is not the author's real-life voice. But... does the same hold true for a collection of short stories? Surely the variety of voices on display would give a clearer indication of the writer's true nature? That being the case, what does *Broken Symmetries* tell us about its author, small-press writer Steve Redwood? If it's a conversation with the writer, what can we learn from it? The back-cover blurb describes *Broken Symmetries* as "Redwood's best short fiction brought together for the first time", from which we can infer that this collection is how Redwood *wants* to be known.

Certainly Redwood is articulate. He has a well-developed style, obvious in all twenty-six short stories in this book. Equally, he shows no particular loyalty to any genre or style. The stories here

are of, and often cross, different genres. Redwood also displays a respectable breadth of knowledge – from Greek myths to the Turkish language. It all adds up to a writer who is confident, practised and accomplished in his craft. Except...

Redwood seems to have a problem with taking himself seriously. The bulk of the stories in *Broken Symmetries* may feature relatively straightforward openings, but many soon devolve into farce or low comedy. For instance, when the first line of a story contains the phrase 'Betelgeusian squoggle-catcher' ('The Road to Damascus'), you know this is not going to be a story which approaches genre storytelling straight. It's as if Redwood has no confidence *unless* his story crosses genres. And if a story appears to becoming too fixed in a particular mode, then he 'crosses' into humour. It makes a good many of the pieces in this collection less satisfactory than they might otherwise have been. Which is a shame, as those which do take a serious approach to their subject and mode are among the best in the collection – 'Epiphany in the Sun', a slipstream piece set in Turkey; 'Circe's Choice', a treatment of the Greek myth; and 'Sacrifice', a near-future story about cloning (which is sadly let down by a revisionist ending).

Indeed, some of the stories here are little more than extended jokes. 'Thank You For Your Submission' is a sick joke presented as an exchange of letters between an author and publisher. 'Reverse Pinocchio Syndrome' is a three-page joke which does exactly what the title describes. The central joke of 'The Heisenberg Mutation' at least works as quite an effective metaphor.

There's also a...not so much a paucity of ideas as a tendency to recycle others' ideas. 'The Burden of Sin' is clearly based on the film *Highlander*, and told with bizarrely inappropriate humour. 'The Crucifixion Conspiracy' is simply a jokey retelling of Garry Kilworth's 'Let's Go To Golgotha'. Neither adds anything to their originals. Further, one or two stories – such as 'Damaged', 'Thank You For Your Submission', 'Expiry Date' – all leave a nasty aftertaste due to their treatment of women. The sensibilities they embody are inappropriate and old-fashioned.

So, if *Broken Symmetries* is a conversation with Redwood, then what sort of man is he? A teller of amusing anecdotes; the man down the pub with all the funny stories, most of which seem vaguely familiar. But they're funny when you've had a few. Sober, they're less forgiving of scrutiny.



THE BRIDE STRIPPED BARE

Rachel Kendall

Dog Horn Publishing, page count tbc, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

The title of Rachel Kendall's collection is looted from one of the masterworks of Dada and proto-surrealism, Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–21). Duchamp's symphony in glass, lead foil, fuse wire and dust defies explanation but provokes reflection on the incongruity of male and female desire; the nexus of sex and pain; and the ambiguous psychosocial potential of technology. The work is complex and meticulous, but its impact and meaning depend on our understanding of the context in which it was produced. The innovative nature of the Dada movement was determined by its practitioners' revulsion at the horrors of World War One and their sense of the liberating possibilities of dreams and desire. It was, in essence, a convulsive rejection of the cultural mores of a ruling class that had led a generation to slaughter.

At this point you'll be wondering if this has any relevance to Rachel Kendall's collection of stories, vignettes and grotesque fragments. It does, I promise. Her choice of title is apt to the extent that she shares Duchamp's interest in the collision of sex and suffering, and that she reapplies, with gusto, many of the tropes and techniques exploited by surrealist storytellers such as Bataille and Bellmer.

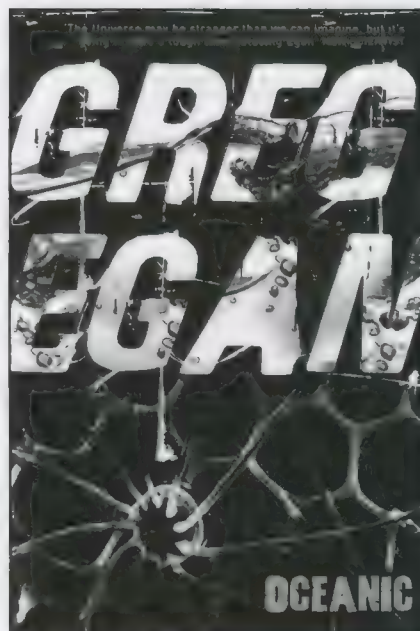
The first problem is that Kendall's imagery-rich set-pieces are hardly stories

at all: you'll struggle to find coherent narrative in the pieces collected here; there is a dearth of identifiable characters; and there is no real sense of place. None of this would matter if the author offered us fresh imagery, formal innovation or new insights into the way we live, think, fuck and feel in the twenty first century. After all, didn't J.G. Ballard rework the same aesthetic to spectacular effect when he dealt with the death of affect and the corruption of desire in *The Atrocity Exhibition*? Ballard's chiaroscuro of witty and unsettling images offered a prophetic understanding of the power of the mass media to rewire the human psyche. Kendall, on the other hand, meanders through scenes of monstrous babies, mutilated bodies, bloody writhing, gaping mouths, wet orifices, splayed legs and the paraphernalia of bondage. There's no sense of being taken on a psychic odyssey here: simply a sense that one has been subjected to a relentless, deeply unsatisfying and seemingly stochastic cascade of images.

The main problem is the lack of specificity in Kendall's prose. This kind of oniric exploration of the power and contradictions of desire depends upon a convincing collision between the familiarity of the quotidian and the rich strangeness of dreams. 'The Pleasure Principle', for example, offers an elliptical reflection on the descent of culture into an emporium of niche perversions, but the piece is too abstract to provoke or even to engage. Unless we know more about these furiously masturbating people, the theme would be better tackled in an essay.

The circus setting of 'Penny Whistle', the tale with most lucid narrative and strongest sense of context, is unsettling but the narrator's detachment serves only to distance us from her suffering. The final juxtaposition of cruelty and liberation seems somehow unearned. The problem here, as in many pieces in the collection, is that the imagery of sadomasochism doesn't appear to serve the story – it isn't ironic, it isn't satirical and it offers no insight into behaviour, emotion or cognition. In fact, the sadomasochism often *is* the story.

I wanted to like *The Bride Stripped Bare*, not least because there are flashes of poetic power in Rachel Kendall's work. This collection, however, resuscitates an aesthetic of the early twentieth century avant-garde. And, without a context of opposition or transgression we're left with a writer seeking to re-fight a battle that was won many years ago.



OCEANIC

Greg Egan

Gollancz, 496pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Graham Raven

The definition of hard sf is almost as slippery as that of science fiction in general, but few who've read any of his work would contend that Greg Egan is not an exemplary practitioner of the subgenre. His work in both the short and long forms is defined by plots grounded in cutting-edge research or speculation, be it in mathematics, physics, astronomy, neuroscience or some combination thereof. *Oceanic* collects a dozen short stories and novellas published within the last decade or so (including a couple first seen in the pages of this very organ) and showcases Egan's ability to flick the sensawunda switch with an authority that few of his contemporaries can match.

Hard sf sometimes stands accused of being opaque to outsiders, emotionally cold or insufficiently concerned with character and story in deference to some Gernsbackian didactic impulse. While it would be impossible to claim Egan's fiction isn't highly dependent on science for its narrative thrust, *Oceanic* demonstrates clearly that he's no emotionally ascetic brainiac; these stories burgeon with characters who, even when ensconced in a fully posthuman state of being, have authentically human hearts and minds. That their passions are frequently intertwined with science should be no surprise given Egan's background in mathematics and computing.

Not all his characters are boffins, however,

and the choice to open *Oceanic* with 'Lost Continent' – a story that neatly reframes the refugee experience in temporal terms as well as geographical and cultural – is a wise one that immediately puts the lie to any accusation of a lack of compassion for the human condition. The story's focal character is uprooted from a medieval Middle Eastern past and dispatched through a temporal vortex, ending up in what appears to be a contemporary version of Australia; his sense of alienation and his bafflement at the Byzantine and Heller-esque bureaucracy that now constrains his existence is sensitively handled, while suggesting that Egan is far from enamoured of his government's handling of asylum seekers.

But make no mistake, Egan loves to write about science, and about those who toil in its temples. It would be fair to suggest that the degree of scientific detail in much of his work might render it unpalatable to those uninterested or inexperienced in the scientific idiom, but to dismiss his work on that basis seems no fairer than dismissing a politician for writing stories that revolve around politics. And I would contend that Egan's aim is not to teach science to his readers; indeed, I think he simply assumes a reasonable level of scientific literacy in his readers, and doesn't care to dumb down the stories that speak to his heart for the sake of a wider readership. If Egan is trying to teach anything, I suspect it is the *joy* of science he wishes to highlight. *Oceanic* abounds with characters whose greatest love is that of learning, of expanding the sphere of rational knowledge...and Egan strives to communicate that joy in terms that don't require a doctorate to be understood.

Motives aside, *Oceanic* is an ideal collection for any reader craving the thrill of big ideas or cosmic scales of space and time – Egan waves away lightyears-long interstellar journeys in a sentence, bridges alternate realities with a few equations and installs believable characters in bodies or environments almost unimaginably distant from our meat-machine existences. He makes maths into sports, and portrays galaxy-wide civilisation as an inevitability while leaving plenty of unexplored spaces for his characters to quest into – be those spaces within their minds or without. What is most notable is how few physical conflicts between sentient beings there are in his work; for Egan, perhaps the only battle worth fighting is against our imperfect understanding of the universe. And looking at the world as we know it today, I think he has a good point.



In Mamoru Oshii's superb animated movie, *Ghost In The Shell* (aka: *Kôkaku kidôtai*, 1995), cyborg cop Batou lost his female partner Kusanagi when she was subsumed by tech evolution into a futuristic Internet. Now, Batou is teamed with a new 'Section 9' rookie for Oshii's 2004 follow-up, **Ghost In The Shell 2: Innocence** (Blu-ray, 7 September), which continues Masamune Shirow's original manga, a sprawling sci-fi action saga with spin-off series *GITS: Stand Alone Complex* (2002–6), contributing further to this future-history epic. Although it's a 21st century storyline, this has the retro appeal of *Blade Runner* in its stylish blend of hardboiled elite detectives with the cinematic urban noir affect, as standard 2D anime characters flicker across richly colourful and often dynamic 3D background scenery where CGI enhances the action. Unlike most other examples of this format and subgenre, the major characters are so finely written and well defined here that each is granted enough rounded personality to fully inhabit a 3D space. It's a rare success in exploring the grey areas between life and pure artifice; a brilliantly crafted animated film not simply a cartoon serial. And, like *Blade Runner*, it's also a provocative meditation on the essence of the 'authentic human'. With its



'uncanny valley' menace of berserker 'dolls' turning homicidal, and suicidal, *GITS: Innocence* explores cyberpunk intrigues of mind-control puppeteers, and often disturbing virtuality/hallucinations amidst creatively designed cityscapes of dazzling textures between light and shadow. Although its chatty script risks falling headlong into the pit of philosophical conundrums/metaphysical waffle which spoils the *Matrix* sequels, bloody violence of a gunfight in the yakuza den, and the ambush of Batou in a mini-market, provides sufficient livewire diversions for any keen fan of heroic exploits to relish. With wry Confucianisms and counter-terrorism in one nifty package, this is science fiction with surprising intellectual depth and striking appeal.



Hitoshi Matsumoto is director, co-writer, and star of *Dai-Nihonjin*, a clever satire of superhero movies unleashed in UK (DVD, 21 September) as **Big Man Japan**. Shot as 'mockumentary' interview footage in reality-TV style, with 3D CGI for implausibly fantastical action sequences, this wryly amusing portrait of the proverbial quiet man with a big stick spoofs comic book archetypes, while avoiding stereotypes of masked

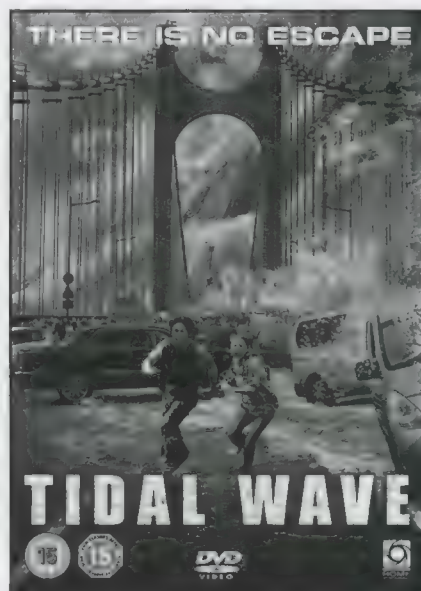


avenger or widely-respected superhuman champion. It's weird fantasy more than SF, and yet 'baddies' tackled by Matsumoto's unpretentious Daisatô are unusual enough – as cartoon manifestations of somewhat Lovecraftian beasts – to warrant attention from most genre fans. Absorbing electrical jolts direct from power stations, Daisatô grows to giant size, enabling him to combat various creatures, monsters and whatever that 'otherworldly' thing is. Are you ready for stretchy-armed 'Squeezy', one-legged 'Jumpy', odious 'Smelly', and 'Mean-Look' villains? Hard to describe accurately, and even more difficult to analyse/criticise, *Big Man Japan* explores an eccentric loner's daydreams of secrecy, failed celebrity and public significance, in a larger-than-life tale where delusional grandeur would seem to be a job requirement. There are visual references to *Hulk*, Marvel characters Giant Man/Goliath, and Bert I. Gordon's *The Amazing Colossal Man* (1957), while a backstory that's presented by some old photos and 'newsreel' clips reveals sufficient hints about earlier jumbo heroes (the growing power is hereditary), to compare this movie with the alternative-historical scope of *Watchmen*. Although *BMJ* bows out with a rather silly and disappointing live-action sequence, in which a Super Justice 'power rangers'-style costumed crew fight against one undefeated 'Red' baddie on a miniature cityscape set (was the production's CGI budget inadequate for this team-up finale?), there is plenty of wacky battle fun to be savoured in previous scenes. If you enjoyed parodies like Craig Mazin's *The Specials* and Kinka Usher's *Mystery*



Men, this accessible eastern variant should appeal to all.

Based on a manga/anime series about 'yokai' spirit monsters that was created back in the 1950s, live-action film version *Gegege no Kitarô* (2007) is directed by Katsuhide Motoki, and released in UK as *Kitaro* (DVD, 28 September). Its fairytale ambiance has comedic subgenre asides with recognisable parallels to jokes found in the likes of *Ghostbusters* and *Beetlejuice*, yet numerous quirks of both characterisation and story development serve to distinguish this from any western counterparts. A vulgar stinky Ratman works for property developers keen to evict stubborn tenants of the 'haunted' building where orphaned schoolgirl Mika and kid brother Kenta are in trouble with a gang of baddies. Righteous superhero Kitaro has flying clogs (wooden slippers), hair-quill darts (full salvos can leave him bald, temporarily) and his own 'magic carpet' (a cotton banner) to combat fierce fox spirits, but such powers are not enough to stop a raid by airborne samurai cops. Kitaro's pals include: cat girl, sand witch, dead father's eyeball – all helpful in ensuring betrayed Kitaro's eventual triumph over night court's cruel sentence of "500 years in boiling oil" when our hero is unjustly accused of theft. There's a stone repository of evil forces, a spiral-necked geisha, a wheel monk driving a climactic train ride to the creepy underworld, and this sometimes baffling narrative rush is chaptered by explanatory animated sequences. The agreeably happy ending is assured. A folklore monster mash-up of romanticised fantasy, this



delightfully bizarre and breezily paced quest is another one of those Japanese peculiarities that's likely to appeal to 'children of all ages'. As yet, sequel *Kitaro And The Millennium Curse* (aka: *Gegege no Kitarô: Sennen noroi uta*, 2008) – which I have not seen – is only available from specialist Asian suppliers. Meanwhile, for more similarly giddy fun, see Takashi Miike's adventure, *The Great Yokai War* (aka: *Yôkai daisensô*, 2005) – also a family-orientated picture, and now available as region one DVD import.



In a gothic 'stately home' on the city's fringe, lurks immortal scientist Helen Magnus (Amanda Tapping, *Stargate* telly), guardian of estates providing fortress-housing for various 'cool' monsters with abnormal genetic origins, Canadian series *Sanctuary* (Season One, DVD, 12 October) plods along from genre farce to melodrama during its episodic Syfy adventures seemingly culled from ludicrous cryptozoological headlines, despite being utter cobbles in views and presentation of how science actually works. Homicide consultant-shrink and profiler Dr Will Zimmerman (Robin Dunne, *Species III*) is recruited by Helen as her new protégé, and blonde action-babe

Ashley (Emilie Ullerup, *iPod*) is Magnus' aggressive daughter – only mildly fazed to learn her father was teleportation-empowered 'Jack the Ripper' (Christopher Heyerdahl, yet another *Stargate* TV escapee) – imitates Buffy with guns. With support characters including butler/servant 'Bigfoot' (also played by Heyerdahl under creature makeup), comic-relief/closet-werewolf and resident techie Henry (Ryan Robbins, *BSG*), and season-arc iterations concerning a sinister cabal that's opposed by five 'Victorian' misfits, the show's meta-fiction components hint at creator Damian Kindler's primary influences (Alan Moore and *League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*). Supposedly a haven/refuge 'for all', but often depicted as a collection of faerie lore exhibits (like the mermaid) or environmental-bubble safety cells (dangerous prehistoric lizard-man), the sanctuary is an ops hub for rescue missions (a plane crashed in mountains, Nautilus submarine down in Bermuda triangle), and cosy drawing-room springboard on quests for 'truth' about myths, revealing irony deficiency in usage of unremarkable comic book notions and uninteresting stereotypes. "Our whole life is a B-movie." There's a vampire-styled Nikola Tesla (Jonathon Young) off his meds, a visit from Dr Watson (Peter Wingfield, *Holby City*) – who 'was' Sherlock Holmes – and 'appearances' for invisible girl Griffin (Christine Chatelain, *The Collector*, 2005–6), but it's left to Peter Outerbridge (star of *ReGenesis*), in his guest role as duplicitous gold-addicted Nomad of *X-Files* imitative *Folding Man*, to demonstrate how this sort of material can be excellent drama if well acted. Mutated plots are spawned from combos of *Fight Club*/*Incredible Hulk*, with super-humans in the cabal's arena of death; a remix of *[REC]*/*Aliens* for a bug-hunt in a warehouse; and reprocessing of popular hits imbued with fanboyish cult allusion reaches its nadir in the sanctuary infestation of tribble-some gremlin/critters dubbed 'nubbins'. There's frequent recourse to running battles and shoot-outs whenever story logic or coherence lapses – Magnus is surely the most trigger-happy 'doctor' on telly – and so the show's originality is confined to its use of green screen for CGI sets, and hi-res digital cameras (resulting in superb image/sound quality on large HD TV). While a better TV series about encounters-with-the-unknown, *Threshold* (2005) – starring Carla Gugino – was unfairly cancelled (nixing ambitious plans

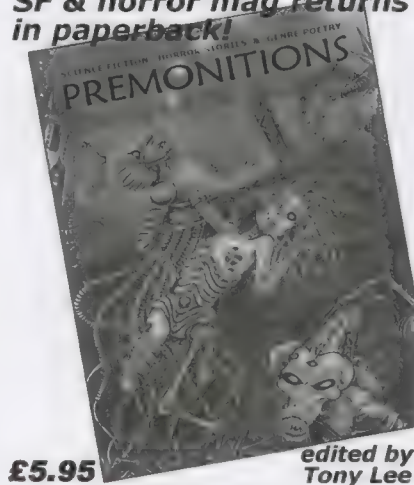
for sequels *Foothold* and *Stranglehold*), inferior timeslot-filler *Sanctuary* has been renewed for another season. With just a few moments of weird fun, it's marginally superior to Brit series *Primeval*, and certainly a big improvement on *Torchwood*, yet there's nothing in *Sanctuary* that demands attention from SF fans. Generally, it has great visual effects, but fails to reach the heights of engrossing thrills and chills that were scaled by *Angel* (1999–2004) in terms of intense TV drama, comedic wit, some genuinely fascinating heroic/villainous characterisations, a consistency of entertainment value, and skilful avoidance of boredom.



Thirty-odd years ago, catastrophe cinema used to be mainly the province of big-time studios. Hollywood movies *Towering Inferno*, *Poseidon Adventure*, *Earthquake*, and more blatant sci-fi like *Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea*, called for massive budgets to stage widescreen spectacle on huge soundstages. Recently, the advent of cheap CGI obviously changed all of that (Cameron's *Titanic* has much to answer for). Nowadays, there are dozens of Z-grade direct-to-disc productions, especially made-for-television flicks, depicting familiar end-of-the-world scenarios using 'desktop-PC' visual effects. Every fire or ice calamity, like *Volcano* and *Day After Tomorrow*, or collision-course countdown thriller like *Deep Impact* (an update of 1979's *Meteor*), results in a flurry of dismal imitations like *Absolute Zero*, *Category 7*, *Magma*, *Epicentre*, *Killer Wave*, *Solar Attack*, *Meltdown*, *Superstorm*, *Aftershock*, *Combustion*, and *10.5 Apocalypse* (need I go on?), where banal 'bad news' plots keep sundry B-list/TV stars employed, if not gainfully. *Haeundae*, billed as Korea's first disaster movie, *Tidal Wave* (DVD, 12 October), slots neatly into a catalogue of middling-to-good 'when things go wrong' pictures, in the 'oceans awry' Asian variant section, reflecting on 1970s films noted above, so that its storyline and concerns are almost indistinguishable from similarly themed US productions. The wretchedly over-sentimental tone of its drama, and the

jovial nature of spectacular amusements when the predicted 'mega-tsunami' finally strikes, undermine what little theatrical impact *Tidal Wave* has when considered as 'extreme possibility' with a plausible scientific explanation. Half of the characters are obnoxious/irritating (bickering family; chav-type girls), while the remainder are just uninteresting stereotypes (alarmist weatherman ignored; estranged couple reunited too late). Poignancy of a search-and-rescue helicopter lifeguard saving lives when he fails to solve his own life's problems is milked far beyond its worth as human tragedy. There's pointed contrast in the mass panic of a crowded beach sequence and the lone office girl's claustrophobic terror when she's trapped in a flooding lift. Survival in the mad chaos is marked by emotional inertia of violins and tearful screaming. Drowned city imagery finds its climax with a previously capsized cargo ship propped up bow-down against the damaged suspension bridge, in an episode designed for the hapless comic relief actor to run around dodging whip-snapping cables during a rain of bulk containers. An hour of character intros is followed by forty minutes of flooding footage. After the apocalyptic dramas of Alex Proyas' *Knowing*, and preceding the 'doomsday' forecast by Roland Emmerich's forthcoming *2012*, this movie seems damnably retro in both pitch and scope; a sad waste of today's filmmaking resources.

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Jack Vance's memoirs came out this summer. Written around the death of Norma, his wife and collaborator of over sixty years, they tell the affecting story of a lifelong partnership in globetrotting adventure in the pursuit of the craft of imagination. Before the botched laser surgery that blinded him in the eighties, the Vance method was to contract a series and then spend the advance on transplanting the family to rented accommodation in an exotic corner of the world, where novels would be diligently knocked out till money or interest ran dry. It's an uplifting tale in its own right that can't help but haunt the viewing of *Up*, which similarly kicks off with an irrecoverable bereavement, but with the additional survivor guilt for the widowed hero of knowing that his beloved Ellie's childhood dreams of travel, adventure, and fulfilment were serially blocked by domestic expenses and the lack of universal socialised healthcare. Pete Docter's film modulates swiftly enough into a quirky, exhilarating homage to Miyazaki (particularly *Laputa*), making up for this

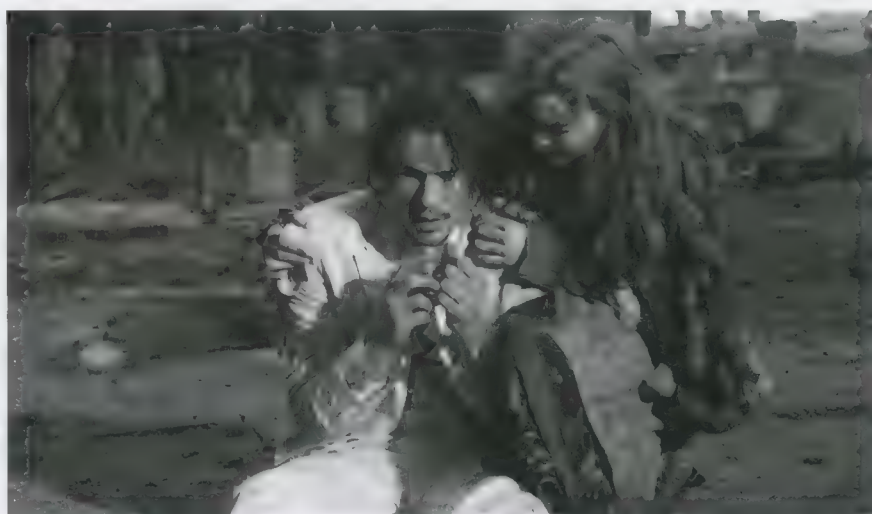


lifetime of missed adventure in a lighter-than-air world of vertiginous wind-borne escapades among fantasy cloudships and lost 3D islands in the sky, from which its hero returns rejuvenated in spirit to play his part in society and family. (He also discards his mobility aid, confirming our suspicion that the elderly merely affect infirmity because they're miserable old bores who choose to live in a world of beiges-out monochrome.)

It's all very amiable, but some of the kids around me were in floods – not just at Ellie's deathbed, but at moments like the loss of Kevin the goony-bird.

There's no honour in making children cry, something Pixar used to know well and indeed made the point of their greatest film to date, Docter's own *Monsters, Inc.*; but their films since the commercial high-water mark of the deplorable *Finding Nemo* have felt more comfortable with the emotional manipulation of their vulnerable audience, and now that we must learn to love the newly enblosed entity known as "Disney•Pixar" we can doubtless expect more of the same. Yet the killing of Nemo's mother is a more shocking narrative crime than that of Bambi's, both for its casualness and for the implication that no matter, it's the dad-son bond that really counts. In *Up*, Ellie's dreams of parenthood and adventure are both left unfulfilled on her deathbed, but we're expected to be consoled by the fact that her husband makes both journeys for her, in ways that could perfectly easily have been enacted at any point in her own lifetime; while the Asian-American fatboy with whom he forms the replacement bond has his own mother displaced almost entirely from the narrative.

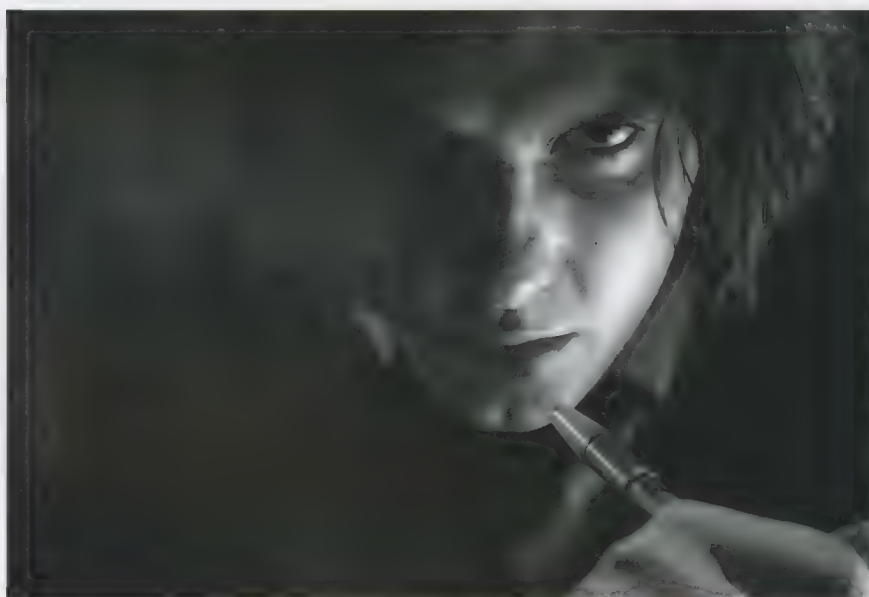
Happily, the perennially unfashionable father-daughter bond is right at the heart of Terry Gilliam's more impassioned take on old age, magic, and disillusion in ***The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus***, in which Christopher Plummer plays a more sympathetic variation on his ancient clay-footed fallen hero from *Up* as an immortal showman trying to escape from the familial consequences of his gambling addiction with the devil. It's an amazing homecoming to deeply personal territory after a quarter-century of variously fraught adventures with other people's material: a film so consummately, definitively Gilliamesque that one marvels that he still had all this in him, with the defiantly actless narrative structure he seemed to have abandoned for good in his American films. All the old obsessions and angers are there, made fiercer by his long experience of Hollywood abuse: fathers and daughters, the rage at authority, the power of imagination to damn or redeem. Its closest ancestor is *Munchhausen*, of whose hero the Doctor is an older and sadly wiser incarnation who has to watch his beloved child pull away from him into her own dream of adulthood. (Both Gilliam daughters are in the credits, alongside their brother and mum.) The Imaginarium



itself, which gives paying punters direct access to the Doctor's meditating mind but reflects their own desires in a choice between heaven and hell, is essentially the door into Gilliam's head, its fabulous inner worlds recycling trademark imagery as old as Python but now in breathtaking photorealistic cg. The plot has some strange turns, the dialogue is often less good than what it's trying to say, the remarkable cast are such an odd mixture that they never quite feel part of the same film, and despite the best efforts of four leading men in

the role the Heath Ledger character isn't terribly well realised by any of them. But the art and power of Gilliam's great films has always resided in deeper kinds of thrill than these rudimentary gratifications, and this is his boldest since *Brazil*: a deeply felt film of phenomenal visual imagination, as well as a moving cinematic love letter to Gilliam's London, with some suitably ferocious things to say about the effect on the artist of having to deal daily with scumbags, scammers, and tossers in order to keep going at all.

The most famous soul-for-youth deal in modern literature gets a new workover in **Dorian Gray**, Oliver Parker's third and most ambitious Wilde adaptation after *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and his first to farm the screenplay out. In moving from the plays to the novel, of course, Parker and his team are faced with a quite different kind of adaptational challenge, addressed here with rather more enthusiasm than success. The novel's bizarre and unshapely timeline consisted of two narratives eighteen years apart and held together only by the extraordinary chapter 11, detailing the malign influence on Dorian's life of the fantastic Symbolist novel that becomes his bible. Parker's film substitutes an awkward epistolary segment to cover the decades separating the Sybil Vane affair (here moved twenty years down the line to 1891) and the outbreak of war, with Dorian's naughty antics shunted conveniently overseas for the duration. This allows the introduction of a redemptive love interest in the form of the recreant Sir Henry's freethinking suffragette daughter; and while nothing that creates a part for Rebecca Hall is ever a wholly bad thing, it severely weakens the force of Wilde's depiction of Dorian's descent into moral ennui and self-loathing for his change to



come from an external force. Since Wilde's dialogue has proven intractable for the heavily replotted film version, characters now converse in such period lines as "I'm sorry for your loss" (bis) and "If I told you, I'd have to kill you." Above all, though, the film struggles to capture an adequate sense of Dorian's wickedness and depravity, as he moves from his first taste of ciggies and gin to frequenting opium dens and *Eyes Wide Shut* orgies, wronging

maidens and snogging chaps, without the slightest regard for what is credible or, more importantly still, what is genuinely shocking and transgressive in Wilde's more subtextually bound world. The general overblownness of the film is mirrored in the fate of the portrait, which in the 1945 film merely turned evocatively Daliesque, but now squirms with digital maggots crawling out of its eyes, and has to be burned as well as stabbed to stay dead.

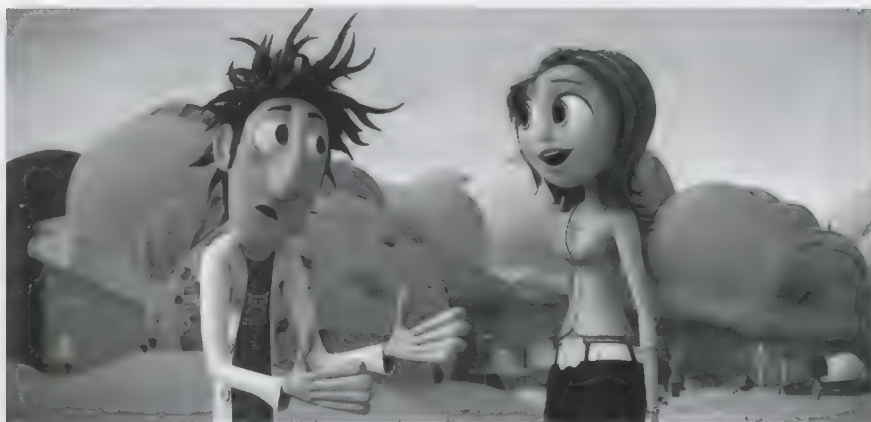
Epistemological romcom The Invention of Lying began as a spec script by Matt Robinson, an industry outsider with no previous credits who wrote the first version in his mother's attic and, in a gesture of what would be career suicide for anyone who actually had a career at the time, suggested Ricky Gervais for the lead. Professionally, at least, it's all worked out happily, with the control-happy Gervais not only coming aboard but co-writing, directing, and bringing Robinson himself in as co-director. (As near as can be made out, the premise and first half are essentially Robinson, while the romance plot and second half are predominantly Gervais.) But perhaps because of the team's general inexperience of Hollywood form, it's an odder film than anyone seems to have intended, beginning harmlessly enough as a comedy thought-experiment about a world in which falsehood is unknown, but modulating into a startlingly frank satire on religion, as Gervais' inept fabrication of an afterlife to comfort his mum on her

deathbed traps him in a web of whoppers that lead to the fabrication of his universe's own God delusion. With the six-minute history-of-the-world deleted in the cinema release, the logic is comedic rather than speculative, which creates enormous problems of credibility and follow-through. The premise is only funny if people actually speak their true minds, rather than keeping their thoughts discreetly to themselves; so the film has everyone blurt out their innermost secrets to strangers in a kind of pragmatic Tourette's. And since it would torpedo an already leaky premise if anyone were to feel the faintest twinge of curiosity about the source of authority behind the things they're told, everyone has to be not only guileless but spectacularly thick. The cast play this up rather well, especially Louis C.K. as the graceless best friend and Jennifer Garner hamming her comedy socks off as the brightly dim love interest. (Gervais, gloomily: "A shark would be sweet and kind to you." Garner, delighted: "It would?") But Gervais' performance style

is still sufficiently unlike that of anyone else in Hollywood that many will find even the jokey first half laugh-free, and the best that can be said for the second half's maudlin descent into a slough of whiny self-pity is that it's tonally adventurous, with repeated insistence that the leading man is more interesting than he actually is. ("You're smart, you're kind, the sweetest man I've ever met, the most interesting person I've ever known." And again: "He's smart, funny, kind, loving; he makes me feel happy, special.") It's something of a mystery why the film, which for a Hollywood product is astonishingly contemptuous of believers, hasn't been denounced and picketed. But the film's argument is that a world without lies is also a world without fiction, imagination, irony, metaphor, rhetoric, taste, depth, critical thought, moral seriousness, emotional complexity, and the capacity to see past the surfaces of people and of things – in short, pretty much everything that makes humour happen. Perhaps true believers don't see the joke.



Christopher Smith's *Triangle*, a UK-Australian coproduction floated on the usual complicated raft of Film Council money, is an attractively conceived variation on the ghost-ship movie in which a sextet of attractive young Saturday yachtspeople find themselves stranded, but menacingly not alone, on a cruise liner in a timeloop. Having apparently missed out on last year's Spanish hit *Timecrimes*, the heroine has failed to pick up on the elementary tropes of time-twister films that when the doorbell rings and there's nobody there it's sure to be you from the future, and any mystery characters with their heads in a sack can be safely assumed to be not total strangers. But where *Timecrimes* was a rather plodding and tidy closed plot circuit, *Triangle* takes pride in being all over the place, deliberately breaking all the rules of consistency and coherence on which the genre is traditionally founded. Though the title suggests a readily diagrammable plot, the actual timeslips are not only entirely unsignalled but impossible to make consistent sense of, and compounded by the characters' at times partially successful attempts to change the course of events. Sometimes, as in the reveal shot of which the film is understandably proudest, a loop leaves something behind each time, so that you know you've run into a recurrent dead end when you stumble on a stash of identical notes in your own handwriting, or identical corpses of one of the other characters. And if you suspect as you watch the unsettlingly disjointed scenes in the opening credits that something nasty is lurking in the cuts, you'll enjoy the vindication as the final narrative trap closes in what's been an unusually busy and eventful series of nonsenses.



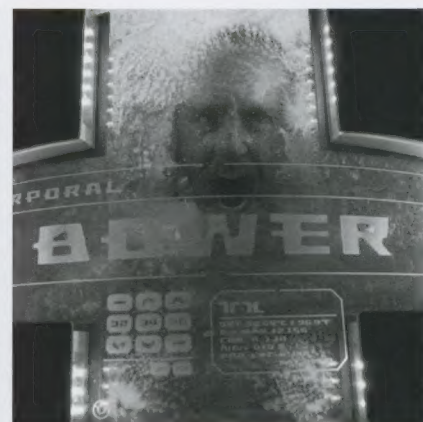
Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs is the latest property to buy up the rights to a cherished American picture book, throw everything away apart from the title and the concept, and assemble an entirely new film from the standard components of father-son issues, geek romance, and self-realisation through disaster movie. In fairness to the result, the Barretts' book didn't really have anything that could really be called a plot in the first place, far less any actual characters; so the film has had a fairly free hand to explore the implications of a technology that will revitalise a dying local fresh-fish industry at the end of its line by synthesising high-calorie fast food from tropospheric water vapour, which is more or less what the film does to the book. As in *Up*, the arrival of fun is marked by a transition from a drab palette of browny industrial greys to bright primary food colours; but the rush of overconsumption that inevitably follows the arrival of free food threatens global environmental catastrophe, albeit now without the messy inconvenience of a farming, fishing, or processing industry. The scariness of the American diet is quite effectively conveyed in the strange, surreal, and moderately gross-out climax, but otherwise it's a film that studiously avoids any contemplation of the actual science and politics of food production. Anna Faris's media-babe romantic interest goes through a mid-film makeover where she reverts to the mousy, bespectacled inner geek that represents her true self; guess whether it's the before or after look that's used in the posters.

Surrogates turns the first volume of the smart, low-key Venditti/Weldele graphic noir into a more than averagely thoughtful reflection on the technology of performance and voyeurism. In the comic, someone is bumping off the "surries", the real-world synthetic avatars through which reality is experienced remotely in a post-social world of living virtuality, leading the detective hero into a typically comicsy chain of conspiracy and revelations running all the way to the top. The film version, written in a rush by the post-Cameron *Terminator* team to beat the writers'-strike lockdown, and directed by T3's Jonathan Mostow, has allowed itself some freedom with the original plotline, raising the stakes by making the assassinations kill the surries' operators as well ("According to the pathologist their brains were liquefied in their skulls"), and bumping up the action quota as well as rather awkwardly reshaping the resolution. But the cinematic implications

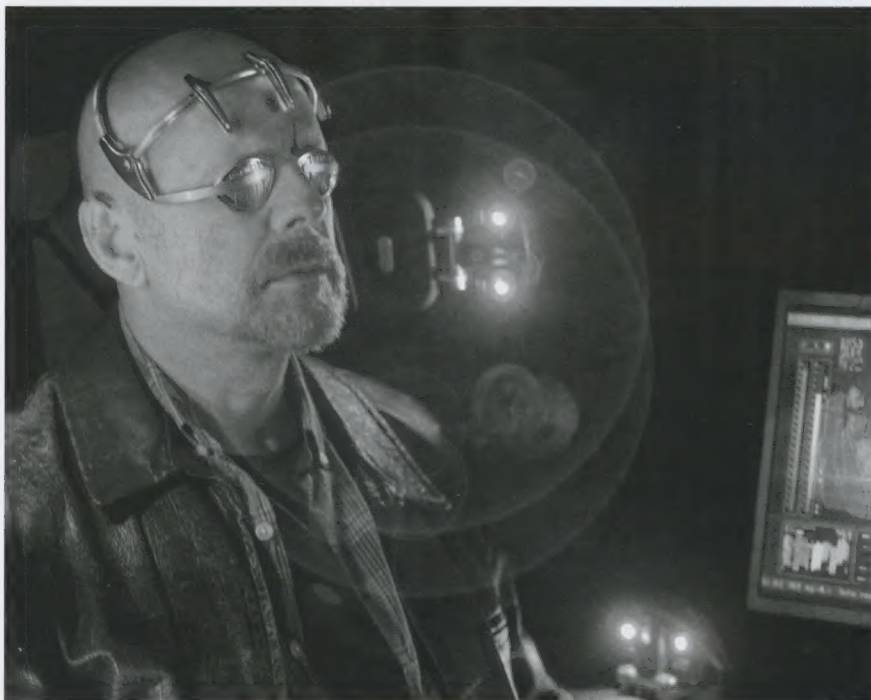
of the concept have been quite cleverly rethought, with Bruce Willis playing essentially his *Twelve Monkeys* character playing a younger, more platinated, filmic, and action-friendly version of his early screen persona. One of the awkward but also intriguing things is that each of the performers has a slightly different version of woodenness for their surrogate characters, and in some cases a different look – possibly because Willis's surrogate is the actor in youth makeup, whereas the Radha Mitchell and Rosamund Pike look like themselves in their surries but are age-madeup for the role of their operators. The concept offers more possibilities than are actually realised for Dickian twists and rug-pulls, and it rather spoils the agony of Bruce's final decision that its outcome has already been shown in the trailer. But it's quite a provocative exploration of the way screen character and narrative mirrors the widening gap between our real and our virtual lives and selves.



Gamer is a foray into similar territory from the *Crank* writer-director-lensmen team of Mark Neverdine and Brian Taylor, with Gerry Butler as an Iraq special ops veteran banged up for murder in a near-future penalverse where inmates serve as flesh-and-blood avatars in a real-world shootup game. The borrowings from *Death Race* are probably less intentional than they look, given that the script carries a 2007 date, though there's some aptness in the merry Cranksters' retaliation for Paul Anderson's kidnapping of their star by nicking his entire film. But in truth *Gamer* is a techno-retread of a host of vintage future-games films from *Rollerball* to *The Running Man*, and less interested in the game itself than in what happens after the hero escapes into what passes for the real world. The best sequence has Butler pursued into a real-world Second Life by bad guys with large guns who turn the game into a gory live-action shooter. The rest is nonsense, really, but styled and cut with the team's usual coked-up visual buzz; and the scene where Gerry boaks up a bottle of vodka to fuel his alcohol-burning getaway vehicle is the kind of plot moment that the authors have made entirely their own.



Anderson himself turns up as producer on the German-made **Pandorum**, a bulgy-eyed assault on the haunted-starship genre, as Ben Foster and Dennis Quaid emerge from interstellar hibernation to find their colony ship has been infested with mutant space zombies, while the mission itself has been disrupted by a mysterious outbreak on the bridge of the spacesickness known as Pandorum whose symptoms include paranoia, psychosis, and massive twist-friendly plot delusions. Though it began as a spec script by former stuntman Travis Milloy (who's admitted to making it up as he went along), the finished film has Anderson's prints all over it, being essentially a mutated cross of his own *Event Horizon* and *Resident Evil*. A particularly neat touch is that the prolonged cryogenic suspension has left our heroes amnesiac, so that even the cast don't know who their characters really are and have to piece their own backstories together as the film goes on and access to new game levels opens up. Quaid, as the senior lead and player controller, gets to sit the whole film out in a comfy control-room chair with a performance composed merely of barking instructions into a screen at the hapless Foster, who within ten minutes is off to crawl through the ventilation system into a series of ever madder shock revelations about the origin of the mutants, the fate of Earth and of humanity, the state of their mission, and an absolute you-cannot-be-serious thumper about a very prominent character that seems impossible to reconcile with what we actually saw at the start of the film. There also seems to be something going on during the end credits, though it's over before you can figure out what if anything is intended. But then, as the antagonist urges at the climax, "You have to let go of your petty concept of reality." It's probably good advice.



District 13: Ultimatum is a stuntman's movie of a different kind, bringing back parkouristes extraordinary David Belle and Cyrille Raffaelli for another Luc Besson-scripted escapade in the lawless fortified banlieues of near-future Paris. Though it opens with a reprise of the closing sequence from the 2004 original, Belle's dashing urban anarchist and Raffaelli's undercover stunt-flic are the only returning characters, in a daft new plot to stop the President's corrupt adviser from ground-zeroing the troublesome 13th and handing the lucrative reconstruction contract to his cronies in sinister multinational "Harriburton". ("Comme en Iraq," notes a member of the team helpfully.) The usual motley horde of Bessonians are recruited to make up the squad, including a hennaed Asian babe in microleathers whose martial art consists of swinging a plait woven with blades in time to her iPod; and the old techniques of getting into cars feet-first through the windows are enlivened with new routines like a fight in drag while carrying a large Van Gogh. As with its predecessor, the theme of the banlieues coming to town has more resonance for a French audience than it's likely to manage overseas, and there's some curious business with the sympathetic liberal President trying unsuccessfully to stand up for liberté, égalité, and fraternité against the corrupt elitists that surround him. Otherwise, the script is another of Besson's autopilot jobs, and the film's considerable charm comes from its likable balletic leads, Raffaelli's choreography, and Patrick Alessandrin's snappy action direction.

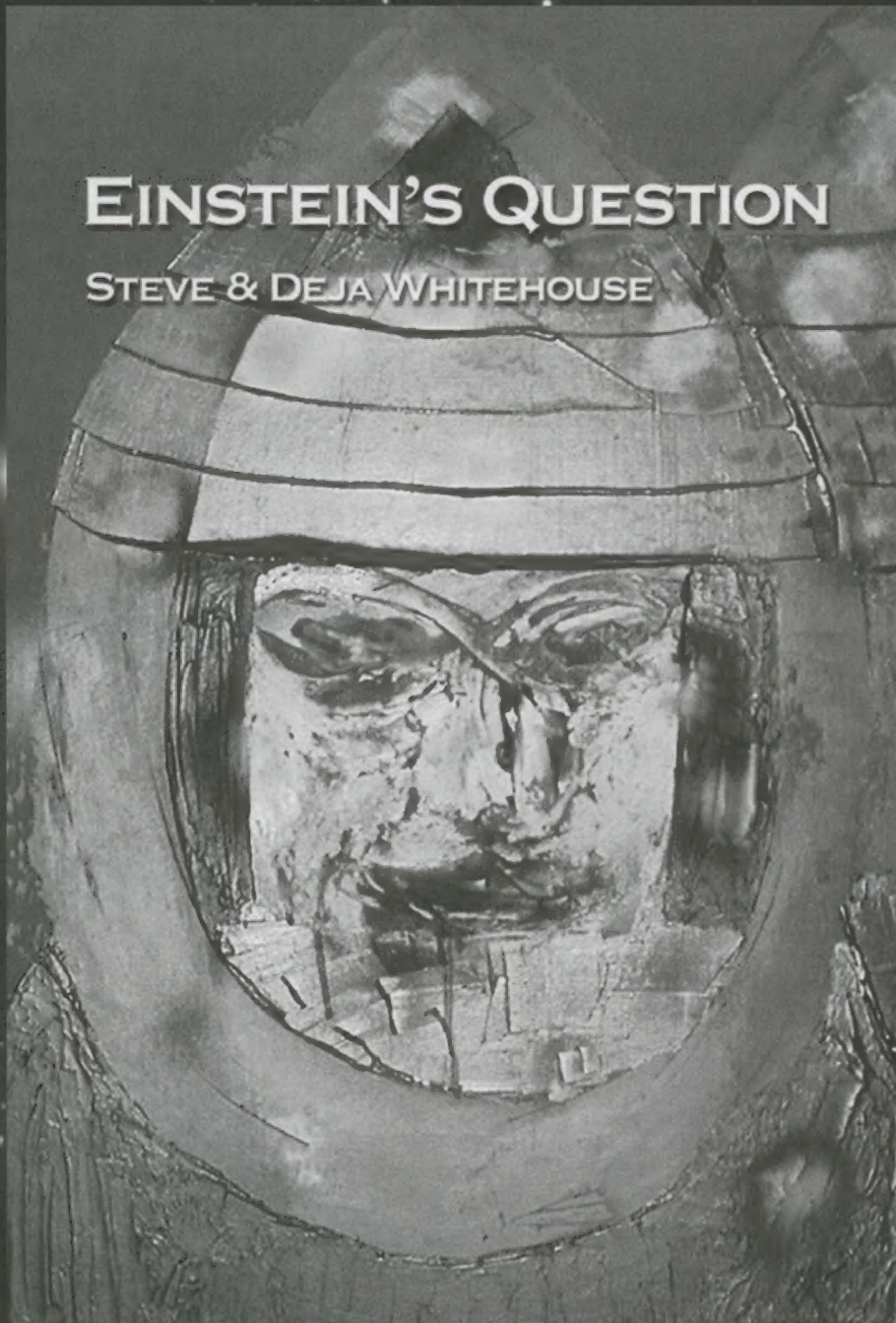


The lawless suburbs also get a title-check in unlikely worldwide hit **District 9**, which brings an unusual African edge to its satirical action romp about the SA authorities' heavy-handed efforts to manage an influx of alien refugees in the townships. As science fiction, it's pretty ropey material: nobody, including writer-director Neil Blomkamp, seems to show much curiosity about what you'd expect to be the pivotal questions of where the aliens have actually come from and why, or what investigative opportunities might be afforded by the presence of a giant mothership hovering over Joburg. But as an action comedy with a distinctively

southern-hemisphere sense of dark humour, it's completely infectious, with Sharlto Copley's nerd-into-hero a brilliant comic creation in his own right, as well as a distillation of the film's refreshingly unsubtle exploration of human racism from a harder and fresher pool of experience than the cocooned American model of *Alien Nation*. When our hero finally Sigourneys up in the alien exosuit and starts kicking security-force butt, it's not just a moment of air-punching narrative exhilaration in its own right, but a vindication of sf's power to adventure beyond its traditional global boundaries, and yet come home to conquer the world.

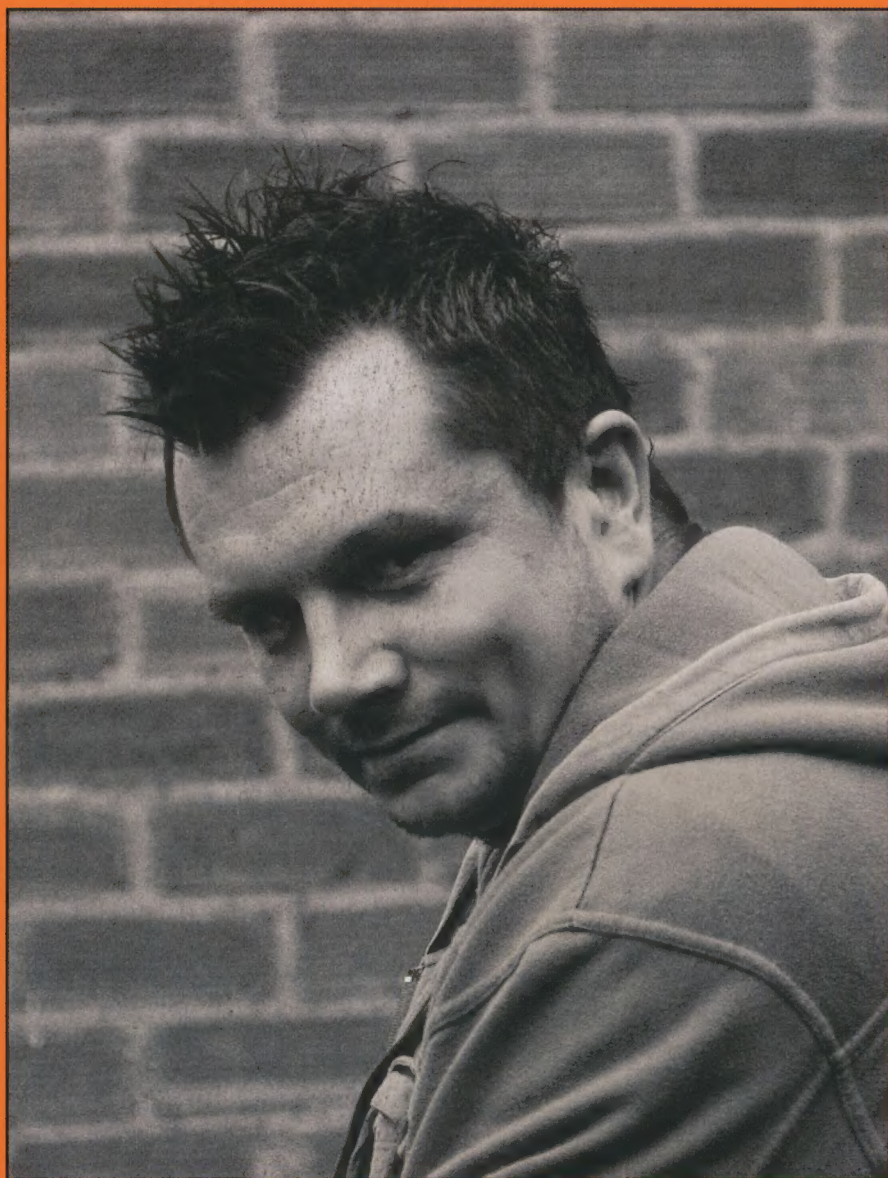
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